

Snapdragon Revolution

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Warning

This novella contains suicide themes,
sexual activity, offensive language, and violence.

If affected by these themes, read no further.

AARON J. CLARKE grew up in North Queensland, attending Bowen State High School and James Cook University, where he was awarded a BA (Hons) II A in English Literature. In 2004, Jacobyte Books published his first novella, *Epiphany of Life*. Aaron is an avid reader of nineteenth-century literature and hopes to write a French novel someday. Aaron's interests are varied and range from classical music to molecular biology. In 2004, the 'Journal of Young Investigators' published his paper on Schizophrenia, an illness from which he personally suffers.

1922

As Reuven wandered among the crumbling, blackened edifices of Occidental University, occasionally stopping to survey the building's broken windows, he imagined the phantom voices of students discussing Shakespeare and Molière. As a middle-aged man, Reuven longed to relive those former collegiate years: it was an anodyne to deaden the dull ache at having outlasted his college and classmates. Reuven collapsed onto a moss-covered bench. *The war has slaughtered a generation of young men, transforming them into loathsome, shrunken skulls.* The stone of regret gathered in his throat. 'I loved you so, Albert.' Reuven sobbed profusely, 'If it weren't for the war, you'd still be alive.'

Even after thirty years, Reuven remembered his beloved's rufescent features and how they contrasted against the pale-yellow walls of his dorm room from which one could see the grass-covered hills (now a mouldering mound of ash) that encircled the red brick dorms of

Occidental University. Reuven recalled Albert's dreamy drawl, 'Only by giving you up,' he had paused, wiping away the tears that streamed down Reuven's cheek, 'can I love you.'

He tried (oh God, Reuven tried) to change the scenario in his mind. Regardless, after many decades, Reuven still perceived his lover's slender fingers twisting the doorknob before exiting the room, leaving him hysterical. Stung by love, Reuven sunk deeper into melancholy, where he saw the discarded fragments (as erotic experiences) float away. A rain cloud of tears gathered in Reuven's eyes as he withdrew a flask from his pocket; after taking a swig, he placed it on the moss-covered bench. Yet, like a tidal current, time retreated, revealing the rough rocks of regret, which, like previous eons, were pacified by the stupefying effects of alcohol. Reuven remembered how his intoxicated younger self had staggered towards his dorm, vomiting on the multicoloured snapdragons (now desiccated stubs) that bordered the outside stairs.

In hindsight, his drunken antics did not go unnoticed by his fellow chums at Occidental University. They watched Reuven lumbering up the stairs with narrowing eyes from the rafters of the red brick buildings, suspecting that he and Albert had quarrelled. Most Occidental Collegians of Reuven's age hypothesised that Albert discarded his troubled roommate for the wealthy Amerykanka,¹ Edith Andley, whom he purportedly loved. Outsiders never fathomed how close the roommates were that the beloved, Albert, had the power to dissolve his friendship with Reuven to prevent scandal—to escape being labelled by society as a denizen of the cities of the plain².

As Reuven glanced over the disintegrating buildings, it no longer mattered what the world had thought of him: the object of his veneration and the Britannian society had both been destroyed by the flames of industrial warfare. Notwithstanding, Reuven welcomed the cage of nostalgia that not even a falling roof tile smashing a few metres away

¹ American.

² Sodom and Gomorrah were two cities destroyed by God for their wickedness.

could dissuade him from the prospect of mentally reimagining those bygone events. In that reimagined past, he transformed into his younger self, where he would again delight in stroking Albert's golden tresses. Reuven closed his eyes and took another mouthful from the flask.

1892

Londinium, the capital of a flourishing empire of Britannia, sunk its military and mercantile teeth in the world's far reaches, where those born poor and non-Britannian were forced into bondage – stripped of their humanity. Despite the sadistic satisfaction with which some landed gentry practised on them, the powerless people persisted, resisting the corrective methods (the branding iron and lash) employed by their overlords to assimilate. After centuries of brutality, the strongest of peoples were worn down and conditioned to think and behave in what was acceptable by the sons of Britannia.

That was not the case for Reuven Hoffman, whose brown eyes widened when he saw Londinium for the first time from the ferry's deck. He marvelled at the architecture, which seemed to pay homage to an earlier empire whose phantom presence was in the avenue of marble buildings, bedecked with ionic columns with golden gilding, that lined the riverbank. Yet something about this city, which Reuven could not put his finger on, was terrifying. As the ship drew closer, the smell of smoke slapped his senses, causing him to thrust his lavender-scented handkerchief to his nose.

A fat man with ginger sideburns, who had ogled Reuven since he caught the same ferry as he, said brusquely, 'One never grows accustomed to it.' He looked Reuven up and down, noticing the young man's sophisticated style. 'You're not from here....'

The young man half-smiled. 'No.'

'Are you looking for...' he touched Reuven's hand. 'A friend?' A look of bewilderment crossed Reuven's face. 'I thought you were.' He looked over his shoulder, making

sure no one could eavesdrop. ‘I apologise...’ he lowered his voice. ‘I thought you were a *renter* by your way of dress....’

‘Renter?’

The man asked in a nervous twitter, ‘Don’t they say that from where you’re from?’ Again, an expression of confusion was imprinted on Reuven’s face. ‘It’s refreshing to meet a naïve young man....’ The man smiled, exposing his yellow teeth. ‘I could help you....’ Reuven swayed as the man put a gold sovereign in his hand. ‘Here, take it... Perhaps you’ll help me in kind.’

‘How?’

The ferry’s horn emitted a piercing sound, and the man bent forward to whisper in his ear. He understood what the man desired: the prospect of being enveloped by the older man’s corpulent arms generated a raging disgust in Reuven.

With self-reassurance, Reuven delivered his *coup de grâce*. ‘What you ask of me, I won’t do....’ He threw the

gold coin into the murky waters. ‘I’m not for sale at any price.’

Reluctantly, the man stormed off to the other side of the ferry, where he stood scowling. Reuven was relieved, but an earthquake of anxiety spread throughout his body because what he deplored most in life was conflicts. Yet his arrival in Britannia would, in time, put Reuven in perilous predicaments where there was no other choice but to wield a sword and slay the dragons that were lecherous men.

Reuven knew that his life was on a precipice of profound transformation that not even his parents in their haberdashery in Edenglassie³ could have imagined. His acceptance into Occidental University (Britannia’s most renowned educational institution) was a prime example of this transformation at work. Yet this paled in comparison with Reuven’s transition into manhood, evident in his Bar Mitzvah five years earlier, where his voice stammered as he recited from the Torah. Reuven recalled Rabbi Malachi

³ Brisbane

teaching him about the tenets of their Jewish faith, where the aged man, from time to time, would quote Hillel HaGadol to him. For whenever the lad was bullied by the other boys (for his strange surreptitious nature), the young Reuven drew strength by thinking about HaGadol's golden rule:

‘What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow....’

Hence, Reuven directed his impulses for retribution into becoming the best student in the Yeshiva College of Edenglassie. He reasoned, *that an educated man can never be subjugated by ignorant people*. So, Reuven devoted his spare time to reading widely, and from those treasured tomes, he learnt about the world outside of *Terra Australis*⁴, but it also left him wanting to escape. Since providence, not to mention diligence, had fulfilled such nomadic yearnings, all Reuven could do was relish it, evident in him lightly tapping the ferry's barrier and surveying the seagulls that dipped in and out of the grey mist with escalating excitement. As the ferry was moored,

⁴ Australia

a shaft of sunlight penetrated the city's haze, transmuting the dome of *Sancte Paule's* cathedral into moonstone, reflecting the hopes and dreams of those who scurried off to work. Reuven was likewise altered: resolute to succeed that not even the arduous journey from *Terra Australis*, or being born Jewish into a world that hated them and simultaneously accepted credit from Jews, could not dispel.

Hours after disembarking, the young man (valise in hand) walked along the bustling thoroughfare of horse-drawn carriages and omnibuses on which were the billboards of tea, chocolate, and tobacco. Yet more portentous were malnourished people in dull, dishevelled clothes carrying in one hand red snapdragons and in the other placards emblazoned in large letters, 'Down with the oligarchs and their lackey King Carolus IV.' However, Reuven took no notice of them, for he was dumbfounded

amongst this throng of humanity by a beautiful young man who travelled in the new horseless carriage—a motorcar. Mesmerised, he followed the motor, which, luckily for him, advanced like a donkey at a slow, steady pace. Aroused, Reuven noted the young man's Apollonian features: pallid complexion, rosy lips, blonde locks, and eyes – oh, yes, those eyes; he would never forget those eyes of deep cobalt. He felt his pounding heart would explode with elation, for this anonymous Adonis was the embodiment of all that was contrary to him. Never had Reuven experienced such sentiments as strong as these, like a seething sea, it swirled, churned, and carried him with such unstoppable force that he feared drowning in its relentless passion.

Mesmerised, Reuven continued to weave among the traffic until the metallic beast shuddered to a halt outside a grand railway station labelled *King's Cross* in gold letters. The pudgy driver, whose face was concealed by a cap, helped the young man out of the motor. With an imperious hand gesture, the youth directed the driver to carry his two

suitcases inside. At that moment, Reuven looked at the railway station's clock and smiled, 'The 13:12 train to Cantabrigia will leave in twenty minutes.'

He dashed inside, almost colliding with a man in a top hat and tails who cast a censorious gaze. 'Sorry, sir.'

His eyes widened with wonderment as the alluring Adonis stood in a queue, preparing to purchase a ticket. Although as affected by this fine specimen of manhood as Reuven was, he strutted over nonchalantly, taking his place in the line-up.

'Please, God grant my wish,' said Reuven in a muffled voice.

Suppressing a gasp of delight, he heard the Adonis say in a refined timbre, 'A first-class ticket to Cantabrigia.'

Flushed, Reuven watched him retreat from the ticket office towards the fat driver, who stood guard over the suitcases. However, the blush of passion drained to white when Reuven recognised the driver as the odious man with ginger sideburns, so he looked away, hoping the older man would not notice him. To the lad's chagrin, as the fat man

exited the station, he paused a few metres from Reuven, emitted a sinister snicker, then scurried away. *I won't allow that cur to ruin my chances with him*, thought the young antipodean, who might have to discredit the driver, even if it meant employing Machiavellian means.

Anyhow, Reuven got ahead of himself, for he had not talked with his intended beloved, who sat on a bench awaiting the 13:12 train. He purchased his ticket without delay, walked towards the seat, and dropped beside him. Minutes dragged by interminably. Reuven could not ignite a conversation, for apprehension had sealed his lips shut. His eyes were fixed on the platform ahead, daring not to look at the living Apollo.

‘Have you got a cigarette?’ Reuven shook his head, daring not to utter a reply. ‘My Uncle Cecil disapproves of smoking.’ The interlocutor paused. ‘He’s constantly telling me it’s unbecoming in a gentleman.’ Reuven cast a sideways glance. ‘Do you disapprove?’ Reuven shook his head again. ‘Do I frighten you?’ Reuven cast a sideways glance. ‘Has the cat got your tongue?’

Reuven wanted to confess his undying admiration but, out of fear, remained circumspect, so he said with a quivering smile, 'Please forgive my impudence.' He paused. 'I'm not from here.'

'That's not surprising.' He looked Reuven up and down. 'Your clothes are elegant.' He stroked Reuven's jacket sleeve. 'That's the finest cloth I've ever felt. You must be a dandy?' He paused, then said with envy, 'My uncle would never allow me to wear such stylish clothes.'

'Why not?'

'It's not because of money.' He paused, then said nervously, 'Which we have plenty... but my uncle disapproves of anything modern....' The young man lowered his voice. 'He especially detests dandies like Oscar Wilde....'

'Who's he?'

'He's a dramatist.' The interlocutor looked at Reuven with incredulity. 'And the talk of Londinium.'

'Oh, yes, I remember him now,' said Reuven.

‘What a queer fish you are.’ He noticed Reuven’s perplexed expression, so the speaker snickered, ‘You needn’t lie.’

When the living Apollo’s penetrating eyes were fixed on him, Reuven blushed and stammered, ‘Well, er... forgive my dishonesty.’ He paused. ‘As I said before, I’m not from here.’

‘As that is the case, I shall be your guide.’ He shook Reuven’s hand. ‘My name’s Albert.’

Eager to press Albert’s hot, hard palm against his own, he said suddenly, ‘Mine’s Reuven.’ He knew the answer to this rhetorical question, but Reuven asked it anyway to feign ignorance. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Cantabrigia.’

With a widening grin, Reuven pointed at the swelling, sooty smoke of the approaching train. ‘Here comes the 13:12.’

The rumbling sound surrendered to a hiss, then a screech as the locomotive’s brakes slowed and stopped the carriage wheels.

‘Are you a first-year student at Occidental University?’

As Albert climbed into the carriage, he said in a fluster, ‘Yes.’ His arms buckled under the strain of the suitcases. ‘They’re slipping.’

‘Let me.’ He handed them one at a time to Albert.

The train’s bell clanged, so Reuven grabbed his valise and clambered inside, closing the door. The locomotive jerked forward without warning, causing him to nosedive into Albert. From this closeness, Reuven smelt tobacco on his breath, and the familiar fragrance of *Fougère Royale*.

I wish this moment could last an eternity, thought Reuven, whose breath quickened with yearning.

To Reuven’s delight, this attraction was reciprocated, for when he pulled away, Albert’s dilated pupils roamed the contours of his body, causing both men to blush. Reuven bent forward again, their lips almost touching. However, the sound of approaching passengers caused him to leap like a grasshopper to the opposite seat. Regardless, he and Albert smiled like delighted Cheshire cats.

While the slow-moving train, like a timid turtle, took its time to reach Cantabrigia, the young men spoke at length. Reuven had gathered from this edifying *tête-à-tête* that Albert was an orphan from a patrician family, dominated by the authoritarian Uncle Cecil.

In contrast, Reuven was evasive – unwilling to divulge his mercantile antecedents and Jewish faith. He dreaded the disease of antisemitism infecting their relationship, so Reuven would have to invent a more appealing familial history.

‘My parents come from a long line of the landed gentry.’

He hesitated to think of what to say next, igniting his companion’s curiosity.

With a raised eyebrow, Albert asked, ‘Whom might they be?’

‘Well, er...’

Caught on the flypaper of deception, Reuven paused, scrambling to find a lie that would not stick to him like an unravelling spider’s web. Albert noticed the hesitation and

placed a hand, ever so gently, on the very top of Reuven's knee, 'I shan't judge from where you've come, new friend'.

Flustered, but reassured, Reuven fished from under his buttoned shirt a necklace with a small, six-pointed star. 'Do you know what this is?' Albert shook his head. 'I'm a Jew... so too is my family... I come from a family of shopkeepers... Does that disgust you?' Again, Albert shook his head. 'I apologise for having lied.' He paused, his voice wavering, 'You'll never know or experience the discrimination of being Jewish.'

Touched by his vulnerability, Albert was about to console him; however, a young woman entered the train compartment. Recognising her, Albert said, 'Hello, Edith.' He half-smiled. 'I thought you weren't coming to Occidental for another week.'

'Well, that's what I thought.' Her gaze darted from him to Reuven, whose intense, mournful eyes fascinated her. 'Mama insisted I come earlier.' She noticed a tear

forming in Reuven's eyes, causing him to exit the compartment hastily. 'Who's he?'

'A friend.'

'Why haven't I seen him before?'

'Well, er....'

'He's beautiful.'

'I shall tell Reuven,' said Albert with a laugh.

Her complexion whitened with embarrassment. 'Please, don't, Albert.' Edith lowered her voice. 'Besides, your Uncle Cecil and my Mama are up to something. They've had clandestine meetings for a week, discussing who knows what.'

'Perhaps they mean to marry.' Albert laughed; however, the young woman was deep in thought. So he resumed, 'Imagine us as step-siblings.'

'Why was Reuven so sad?'

'Well, er... It was nothing important.'

'Reuven's an unusual name.' She searched her handbag for a pencil and paper, then jotted it down. 'I should look up its etymology.'

‘Edith, you’ll make a wonderful linguist,’ said Albert in playful jest.

‘That’s what I intend to do at Occidental.’ She saw Reuven approaching. ‘Shh, say not a word to him.’ Edith outstretched her hand as he collapsed onto the opposite seat. ‘As Albert has yet to introduce us, I thought I would. Hello, my name is Edith Andley.’

Reuven admired her forthrightness, so he shook her hand. ‘Reuven.’

Her eyes brightened with delight, for she heard the timbre of a non-Britannian. ‘You’re not from here.’

‘No.’

‘And neither are you, Edith,’ said Albert in mild condescension.

Rather than rebuking Albert for having pointed out the defect of not being born in Britannia (though her mother’s money was ample to provide admission), Edith focused on the taciturn Reuven by asking, ‘Where are you from?’

‘Terra Australis.’

‘Oh, how marvellous! We’re fellow colonials.’ What she said next was her way of lightly admonishing Albert, whose eyes darted from her to Reuven with uneasiness. ‘Though Ameryka won its independence in 1777.’ Again, Edith ruffled the waters of social decorum by untactfully telling Reuven, ‘*Terra Australis* should revolt, unchain itself from the motherland.’

Albert clenched his fist, trying to contain his rage. ‘No, Edith, that’ll never happen.’

‘Why not?’ asked the young woman with soaring scepticism.

‘Because they love their motherland.’ He paused, then looked straight at Reuven. ‘Don’t they, Reuven?’

He nodded his head to appease Albert; however, the hardheartedness of the alluring Adonis had sowed doubt in Reuven’s mind. Despite that, as the Cantabrigia sign passed by, Reuven could not (even if he wanted to) swim against the current of carnality, so he would overlook this incident.

In the wallpapered drawing-room of sage green poppies were paintings, statues, and other accoutrements of wealth; however, at the back of the room was an extensive rectangle shadow where once hung a prized picture. The elephantine tread of footsteps disturbed the room's stillness, followed by a low, shrilled woman's voice demanding to enter so she (as she told her host) may savour his Aladdin's cave of *objets d'art*. As Mrs Andley was ushered in by Cecil, who directed her (with an unsteady hand) towards the opposite end, hoping she would not notice the ugly shadow, his subterfuge invited the older woman to turn around.

‘Where's the Delacroix?’

‘It's being cleaned and revarnished.’

The mask of pretence he wore slipped when Mrs Andley said, 'You needn't lie, Cecil.' His eyes widened with worry. 'A month ago, I bought your Delacroix.' The colour drained from his face, so he looked away. 'I know about your financial difficulties.' The threat of violence erupted as Cecil raised his fist. 'I can help you, Cecil.' She paused, noticing his hand like a drawbridge slowly descending. 'But you must, in return, give me something.'

A smile gradually formed as he looked back. 'Whatever it is, it's yours.'

'I want your aristocratic name.'

Overwhelm with the prospect that the abyss of his avarice would be filled with gold, he supplicated himself before the mortal incarnate of Fortuna, Mrs Andley. 'Do you wish to marry me?'

'Dear God, no,' said the woman with derision as she dropped to the divan. Puzzled, Cecil was about to speak when Mrs Andley continued, 'I want my daughter... And your nephew to be bound in matrimony.'

As Mrs Andley waited for his response, which was not forthcoming, for Cecil was surprised by her audacity, she pulled a cigarette from her handbag, lit it, and took a drag. Smoke streamed from her nostrils, for she had transformed from Fortuna into a she-devil whose sole purpose was manipulating everyone to serve her aspiration. Nothing happened by chance. Mrs Andley, like an archaeologist excavating a tomb, discovered all that had to be known about Cecil: his desperate need for money and lack of scruples for obtaining it.

‘Albert will be easy to convince.’ He rubbed his chin, then continued with a falter, ‘I suspect Edith will be more of a challenge.’

‘I’ve thought of that, so I shall see her a week or two before the university vacation.’ She paused, taking a drag on her cigarette. ‘I’ll remind Edith of her filial obligations.’ As she held the cigarette, its ash fell like grey snow onto the Persian carpet of multicoloured flowers. ‘Besides, it’ll be no surprise that you and I are cut from the same cloth, Cecil.’

‘How much money, Mrs Andley?’

Her eyes sparkled as she chuckled, ‘Call me Catherine, seeing we’ll be related through marriage.’

‘How much, Catherine?’

‘£50,000.’ His eyes bulged from their sockets; however, what she said next caused his heart to throb with rapture. ‘Upon my death, Edith will also get an annuity of £10,000 annually.’

‘It’s settled,’ said Cecil as they shook hands.

Later in the afternoon, when Mrs Andley had left for the more accommodating *Savoy Hotel*, Cecil ordered the ginger sideburns driver, Sims, to wire for Albert’s immediate return. The elite, thought Sims as he motored to the telegraph office, would never venture into the city because, at this time, drunkards would invariably start fights, or naïve clients would fall prey to syphilitic whores.

Yet as Sims sped along the cobbled streets, unease surged up his spine. Londinium’s usual hustle and bustle surrendered when he entered Oxoniensis Street to an eerie

silence. Ahead, a swarm of famished people in worn, dishevelled clothes flooded the street, followed by mounted police with raised batons encircling them. Sweat gathered on Sims' temples as he slowed the vehicle, hoping the tension would deescalate. He recoiled in disgust as the police charged, hitting men and women, even those pregnant: this was the systematic annihilation of anyone dissenting from King Carolus IV's authority.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

A mounted policeman from behind struck the vehicle with his baton, causing the ginger sideburns driver to flinch.

'Shift it,' said the mounted policeman, waving him onwards.

As Sims motored towards the telegraph office, worry whitened his face as a rivulet of bloody detritus gushed down the drain, purging the street of the police violence that had occurred. Previously, Sims had heard stories of police brutality meted out to impoverished workers north of Britannia as fake news. What he witnessed now

(bloodied bodies loaded onto wagons) challenged his beliefs, leading to an epiphany that the King's Government was recalcitrant—unable to empathise with the workers—for they worshipped the golden calf of avarice.

Reports of police brutality against the poor did not penetrate the ivy-covered walls of Occidental University, for this institution had, for countless centuries, remained as silent as the dead workers in their graves. Despite that, as Reuven, Albert, and Edith wandered along the sandstone passageways, they could not escape, even if they wanted to, the simmering scorn of the college footmen, who cast contemptuous stares as if to suggest, 'we hate your kind... it's only because of your money we wait on you.'

In this academic world, nothing was what it seemed, for the Dons of each college communicated to one another in a hieroglyphic code of words and gestures to either help

or hinder their students. What mattered was for the university to serve the powerful few, even at the expense of its students. Hence, Reuven, in particular, would have to be careful not to step out of line, whereas Edith and Albert were given more leeway because of their money and social position. The trio were unaware of such machinations, for they were stimulated by intellectual curiosity, impassioned by youthful idealism.

Yet this idealism would be challenged when the young men returned to their male dormitory, leaving Edith to explore the books in the grand library. Behind their dorm walls, away from the prying eyes of women, Reuven and Albert entered a primitive tribe where unfettered drinking and tomfoolery coexisted with intellectual endeavours. Notwithstanding, this environment, as Dante put it, ‘abandon hope, all ye who enter here,’ aptly described the temptations that were on offer, for Reuven and Albert’s eyes widened with delight as half-naked men threw bucketfuls of water on each other. Without warning, the cold slap of water ran down their backs, and in that instant,

they joined in the horseplay, and for an hour or more, they frolicked with the other young men.

Exhausted, Reuven and Albert retreated to their dorm room to change for dinner, which would be served in a centuries-old dining room lined with the portraits of famous collegians whose once beauteous faces had been marked with age or death. He looked on with longing as Albert stripped, and in that unabashed state, the alluring Adonis turned to face Reuven, exposing his sculptural body.

Enraptured, Reuven could only stammer, ‘We mustn’t be late....’

Yet in his heart, Reuven wished they could remain in this room like lovers lying side by side in the tomb of nostalgia.

Then there was a knock at the door, followed by a footman saying in a gruff voice, ‘I’ve got a telegram for Albert Sinclair.’

With haste, Albert dashed to the door, concealing himself from behind the wooden barrier, and he snatched the telegram, slamming the door shut.

As Albert read, his hand trembled. ‘My uncle demands that I return to Londinium.’

Albert dressed in silence, unwilling to answer the many questions directed at him by Reuven, who was initially perplexed by the living Apollo’s sudden alteration.

‘When will you be back?’ asked Reuven with worry and sadness.

‘It depends on my uncle.’ Albert threw clothes into his suitcase. ‘A day.’ He hesitated. ‘Maybe longer.’ Albert pressed the case’s latches shut.

Without saying goodbye, he left Reuven alone.

A day passed, and then another. Still, Reuven had not heard from Albert, compounding his dread that the venerated beloved would never be seen again. To his relief, on the third day, Albert returned, but this was not the Apollonian youth Reuven had fallen for, but an altered

form that did not respond as he would have done to Reuven's touch. At first, Reuven disregarded this change as temporary, but he noticed Albert's attention was focused like a beam of light on Edith as the semester progressed. All Reuven could do was passively watch Albert wooing the young woman, who, over time, was becoming more unwilling to further fuel such romantic yearnings, for she (to Reuven's bewilderment) was concentrated on the young colonial man.

The more Reuven resisted, the more eager Edith became, where she, at every opportunity, engineered impromptu encounters, for she, like an Amazonian huntress, knew the habits of her prey. Thus, later one day, she saw Reuven flicking through a long-winded book about architecture in the library, so the huntress approached with unwonted courage to talk to him. Yet the instant the young man noticed her coming, he slammed the book shut, placing it back on the shelf. Awkwardly, Reuven pretended not to have seen her, and dashed towards the exit.

‘Please don’t leave,’ implored Edith, hoping to allay his anxieties. ‘Was the book you’re reading any good?’

‘Well, er... no.’ He swayed like a tree in the tempest of apprehension. ‘It was too trite.’ Her widening smile unsettled him. ‘What is it you want from me, Edith?’

‘Your friendship.... That’s all I desire....’ She dropped into one of the chairs surrounding a long reading table and gestured for him to sit down. ‘You needn’t be afraid.’

‘I’m cautious.’ Reuven edged closer, then sat down. ‘I’ve got a reason to be.’

Lost for words, they sank deeper into an abyss of awkwardness with each passing second. Unable to tolerate it any longer, Edith blurted, ‘You’re Jewish, aren’t you?’

‘Well, er.... yes.’ He jumped up as if the chair were electrified. ‘How did you know?’

‘Your name, it’s obvious you are.’ Reuven dropped back into the chair, casting his gaze downward. ‘That’s nothing to be ashamed of.’ She reached out and stroked his hand. ‘Besides, you and I have a lot in common.’

‘Like what?’

‘We’re both oppressed....’

‘How are you oppressed?’ asked Reuven with sneering scepticism.

‘Women, Jews, and other subjugated peoples must conform to society’s repressive rules.’ Edith detected a flicker of understanding in his beautiful brown eyes. ‘Haven’t you noticed how men like Albert treat us?’

‘You’re mistaken, Edith.’ He withdrew his hand and said with intensifying rage, ‘Albert has never mistreated me!’

‘Trust me, he will.’

Reuven leapt from the chair and dashed to the exit, leaving Edith to censure herself severely. ‘What a dullard I am.’ Tears welled up in her eyes. ‘Now he hates me.’

Defeated, the young woman walked with a downcast head to her dormitory; however, the moment Edith entered the sanctum of feminine society, she heard the low, shrilled voice of her mother calling out. Edith hugged the gruff Mrs

Andley, hoping to hide her hurt from the older woman, who sensed the girl's deception by the ostentatious greeting.

‘Mama, what a pleasure to see you.’

Catherine Andley knew full well that her daughter found little comfort every time they met; however, the mother played along with the farce that was their parent-child relationship. Therefore, Mrs Andley listened to the girl prattle on about university life, but when they entered Edith's dorm room, the older woman closed the door and told the girl directly, ‘Enough of that. One cannot learn from dusty books about the real world... Besides, academia is no place for a young woman of your high social position, Edith.... You had to serve your dear papa's interests.... Now he's dead... Let me remind you I've inherited that obligation....’

Edith stared lividly at the domineering dowager. ‘I haven't forgotten, Mama. Nor have I ignored my filial responsibilities.’

‘What do you think of Albert Sinclair?’

‘Well, er.... He’s... Why are you asking me this, Mama?’

‘Albert’s a handsome fellow.’ She stopped. ‘Has he captured your heart, Edith?’

‘Well, er... Never has that entered my mind... We’re friends, nothing more.’

‘Would Albert make a satisfactory husband?’

‘Yes, for a self-absorbed girl.’ Shaken by her mother’s temerity, Edith threw a disapproving gaze. ‘But not for me, Mama.’

Enraged, Mrs Andley shook her. ‘Listen to me, you stupid child.’ She stopped to allow the fury that raged in her mind to subside. ‘The Sinclair name can open the door to Britannian society.’

‘I don’t care for him, nor does Albert care for me.’

Rather than reacting with violence, Catherine tried to reason with Edith. ‘We can buy people’s affections.’ Mrs Andley saw a glimmer of incredulity in Edith’s eyes, but this did not deter the matriarch. ‘That’s one advantage of being wealthy.’

‘Love isn’t a monetary transaction.’

‘Oh, yes, it is.’ Tears trickled down Edith’s colourless cheeks, for she (even renouncing her inheritance) could not concede to her malicious mother. ‘Darling Edith, my words have upset you. Shh, don’t cry, my baby.’ Catherine cradled the fragile child, who wriggled like a worm on a fishing line. ‘Once, I was young and full of romantic notions like you. Shh, don’t cry.’ The matriarch tightened her grip, fearing Edith would permanently escape her control. ‘The only way to survive....’ She struggled under her mother’s boa constrictor embrace. ‘Is to have money and power.’ Finally, Edith broke free, pushing the older woman aside as she stormed out of the room. ‘Darling, think about it for now.’

As Mrs Andley boarded the train to Londinium, unaware the bonds (which bound her to the corporeal world) were unravelling, she imagined her compatriots in

*Nowy Jork*⁵ saying in a chorus of gloating voices, ‘Catherine, what a has-been you are... Trying and, one might add, failing to marry off Edith to the aristocratic Sinclair family.’ While Catherine took her place in the train compartment, collapsing into the green upholstered seat, her mind switched to the impassioned pleas of Edith an hour ago. Not even in earlier times could stern words or a beating from the matriarch deter Edith from challenging the destined role of every young woman: a docile creature whose purpose was to please their husband. Although Mrs Andley admired Edith’s conviction, the dowager feared the fire of rebellion would set the girl’s heart alight, making her more difficult to manage.

Whilst the train jerked forward before gathering speed, it never occurred to Catherine that mother and daughter were an inverse image of the other. Edith desired a divine love, not a common one marred by licentiousness. In contrast, Mrs Andley yearned for acceptance by Britannian society at whatever cost, even if it meant

⁵ New York.

surrendering her soul. Catherine no longer cared what others thought (mainly middle-class supercilious men seated beside her who flashed a scornful gaze every time they lowered their newspapers). Hence, she smiled (further infuriating them) and then pulled a cigarette from her handbag, lit it, and took a drag. No virtuous woman would dare smoke in public; however, Mrs Andley was no ordinary woman, for she enjoyed ridiculing the Britannian establishment and, simultaneously, wanted to join its illustrious rank.

Yet the prospect of being considered a failure caused Catherine's hand to tremble, showering cigarette ash onto the compartment's wooden floor. Unsurprisingly, the men signalled to a passing steward, whose narrowing eyes twitched with worry.

'Madam, extinguish your cigarette, please,' said the steward, pointing at the no-smoking sign.

'Of course.'

She stubbed out the burning butt on the chair's armrest with an impish grin, which unsettled the steward and the other men.

They're terrified of strong women, thought Mrs Andley, rapping her fingers on the frosted windowpane.

While the train snaked through the luxuriant landscape, Mrs Andley noticed people ploughing fields in dull, dishevelled clothes. Their eyes were void of happiness, yet the moment they knew someone was watching, their eyes were engulfed with wrath, which frightened the matriarch, causing her to look away. Mrs Andley was cognisant of the growing unrest in the north of Britannia. Nonetheless, she was unaware the bomb of revolution was about to explode in the slums of Londinium later that evening. The verdant landscape (the closer the train drew to the city) transformed dramatically into rows of factories shrouded in billowing smoke, around which were clustered grey tenements. Poverty, rather than engendering compassion for the less fortunate, invited disgust in the upper echelons of society that even Catherine

Andley, as she looked from the train's window, cast a censorious stare at the raggedy children playing in the dust piles. To her surprise, groups of working poor gathered by the railway line carrying red snapdragons in one hand and in the other placards emblazoned in large letters, 'Down with the oppressive oligarchs and their lackey King Carolus IV.'

Without warning, the children threw a barrage of rocks at the train, causing some of its windows to shatter. The train raced along the track, hoping to evade the protesters. Ahead, black smoke blanketed the route, concealing the approach of another train. Wham! The metallic beasts somersaulted like elephants through the air before crashing and exploding into flames.

As Edith read the telegram announcing the death of Mrs Andley, she collapsed to the floor and, like a fish out

of water, thrashed about, trying to breathe. She felt unashamed after recovering, now that she had lifted off the weight of Mrs Andley's marital expectations from her shoulders.

‘At last, I’m free,’ sighed Edith, for it seemed disingenuous to shed tears, as there was never a love of which to speak between mother and daughter. Hence, the girl would resume her morning routine of studying in the cavern of books that was the library.

In the aureole glow of the sun, Edith exited the vestal sanctum of her dormitory. She lumbered (deep in thought) towards the library, where she saw the students, who had not gone on holiday, huddled in front of a message board reading about yesterday's train accident. Her face was as white as the newsletter, which proclaimed the deaths of one hundred people in large letters. Then, to her surprise, sorrow slapped Edith as tears stung her eyes, so she dashed inside the building, hiding amongst the many philosophical tomes that she believed barely anyone had read. However, the young woman was wrong, for Reuven was studying

Plato's *Republic*. Edith would have welcomed a conversation with him in the past, but now she wanted to be left alone; however, he looked up from the book, preventing her silent escape. Like most men, Reuven was obtuse and did not discern a furrow of despair on her countenance because Edith, like the famed actress Sarah Bernhardt, was apt at regulating her emotions for dramatic effect, evident in her widening smile as she approached him.

He said in a meditative manner, 'The *Republic* seems to me even more relevant with the unrest that's going on.'

'How can you say that, Reuven?' Edith dropped onto the wooden chair next to his. 'Honest people don't loot shops or commit violence to achieve equality.' Her anger threatened to erupt, so she tried suppressing it. To Reuven's delight, she challenged him by arguing, 'It's an antithesis to all that a moral society stands for....'

'Well, the workers were provoked by an unfair system. A system that exploited them. Worked them to exhaustion. At low wages. Barely enough to keep them

alive. From the cradle to the grave, the poor are condemned to this fate. Without the prospect of rising above their station in life.'

'I don't believe a word of it,' said the young woman.

'Open your eyes to what's happening around you, Edith.' He looked at her strangely. 'Then you'll realise what I say to be true.'

'It's never happened here.'

'Universities can never be an accurate measure of a society, for they would never bite the hand of the government that funds them. Besides, universities play a part in the government's system of oppression. Haven't you seen how erudite people treat uneducated workers?' Reuven looked around to make sure no one was eavesdropping. 'With contempt.' He hesitated. 'They belittle them with their voluminous knowledge to draw attention to their intellectual superiority.'

Edith whitened with worry, for the man beside her was transforming into a dangerous radical. She did not understand this rapid change and was about to question

him when he interrupted with renewed vigour. ‘The scholar would be at a loss if society were to crumble to dust.’ He hesitated. ‘Didn’t you say Jews and women suffer oppression?’ She nodded. ‘Money also plays a role in subjugating them.’

Unable to weigh the validity of his claims on the scale of moral rectitude caused Edith to roll her eyes in disbelief. ‘Please, Reuven, let’s talk about something else.’ He was lost for words, so she reignited the conversation. ‘How’s Albert?’ She stopped. ‘Is he safe holidaying in Londinium?’

His once-animated voice gave way to an anxious twitter. ‘Well, er... I don’t know... Albert said little when the semester ended.’

‘When classes resume a week from now, Albert will regale you with fanciful stories.’ Reuven returned his gaze to the book. ‘I thought you were dear friends.’

She seized his hand; however, he jerked it away. ‘Please, Edith, don’t mention him to me again.’ He flashed

a furious gaze at her, then focused his attention on the book. ‘If you don’t mind, I wish to study alone.’

His words haunted her as she returned to her dorm later that morning. Reuven had become a stranger, and no amount of feminine affability could change him back to a treasured friend. The dull ache of unrequited love enveloped Edith, causing her heaving bosom to be constricted against the whalebone corset. As she staggered up the dormitory stairwell, death’s icy lips pressed against her own, triggering her to undo the bodice and take lungfuls of air.

‘What a fool I am to worship him,’ sobbed Edith as she opened the door to her room. ‘Reuven’s incapable of anything resembling affection.’

An uneventful week passed by in Cantabrigia, yet sporadic fighting between the working poor and the army swept from the slums into Londinium's major thoroughfare, where radicalised protesters flung homemade bombs into the parliament in whose hallowed halls the government were voting punitive measures against them. Three kilometres away on the other side of the Tamesis River, Albert and Uncle Cecil watched from the sage green drawing-room windows, the flames taking hold of Britannia's centre of political power.

‘This is madness,’ said Cecil with alarm and abhorrence. He looked from the ensuing mêlée to Albert. ‘You must win, Edith...’ Albert was speechless, unable to confess his failed attempts to woo the now wealthy orphan. A tear wetted the old man's lashes as he continued, ‘She has the money to save us.’

They flinched when five horse-drawn fire trucks rumbled down the cobbled streets towards the parliament. A moment later, a group of destitute men waving red

snapdragons tore down the road, followed by mounted police who raised their batons, striking them like sewer rats. A rivulet of blood stained the grey stone, causing Albert's complexion to match the sage green of the drawing-room, so he looked away.

His upper lip curled as Cecil said, 'Thank God the police have punished those reprobates.'

'Uncle, they have reason to protest.' Albert's words were tantamount to treason, and the old man looked at him incredulously. 'What can you expect from people who are starving?'

'Well, if you can't marry Edith.' He gestured at the window. 'We'll be like them.' He closed the curtains, flashing a wilful gaze at the young man. 'I, for one, will never stomach poverty.' He pointed at the door. 'Now the holidays are over, go back to university.' As Albert exited the room, the old man continued, 'Seduce Edith. Otherwise, we'll brand ourselves with disgrace.'

Two hours later, Albert made out (in the glare of the afternoon sun) the sign to Cantabrigia, informing him that

the train was moments away from the university town. While waiting, Albert overheard old men in the next compartment discussing the severe droughts and catastrophic floods in the world's breadbaskets: Ameryka, Indlandi, Terra Brasiliae and Sinae⁶. Albert pricked up his ears as one of the old men confirmed his suspicions. The old man said in a worried timbre, 'This will lead to spectacular inflation.' He hesitated. 'Plunging the world into economic Armageddon.'

Icy-terror struck Albert, causing him to wrap his arms around himself as the train slowed before shuddering to a halt outside the station. *Edith's money will cocoon Reuven and me from economic Armageddon*. Within his heart, he could never love Edith as he did for Reuven. Nonetheless, her previous rejection had wounded Albert's *amour-propre*, corrupting it to where he cruelly spurned the young antipodean. Besides, Albert believed that with a cornucopia of coins, Reuven would forgive him, and they would sail to *Terra Australis*. Thus, the young man would

⁶ America, India, Brazil, and China.

do whatever it took to save himself and Reuven, discarding worn-out associations like Edith Andley and Uncle Cecil. Never would it seem conceivable to Albert that the revolt in Britannia would sweep across the globe—overthrowing the class system.

As the sky's golden hue surrendered to a deep purple, Albert entered the sandstone courtyard of his dormitory, where he saw the star-like flicker of a lightbulb in his room, causing him to take a deep breath and lumber up the stairwell. His hand hovered on the doorknob before opening it. Reuven was hunched over a book, unaware his roommate had entered.

‘How was your vac?’ asked Albert in a conciliatory tone, closing the door and putting his suitcase beside the beds.

Reuven scrutinised him, then returned to the book. ‘Uneventful, I stayed behind mulling over the *Republic* and the *Symposium*.’

‘Ah, ancient Greek is challenging to decipher,’ laughed Albert. He would have to tiptoe towards the truth, fully aware that an off-the-cuff remark would send him crashing. ‘Anyway, you weren’t alone?’

‘No, there were other students,’ said Reuven with indifference.

‘Anyone I know?’

‘Well, er... Edith.’

‘Did you spend time with her, Reuven?’

He looked Albert straight in the eye. ‘Ah, I remember now. Divine love is an ideal expression of love, whereas common love is.’ He hesitated and asked with cutting irony, ‘Which one do you believe in, Albert?’

‘Enough of that. I’ve sad news to tell you. Edith’s mother is dead.’

‘What? How do you know?’

‘The newspaper named her a victim in last week’s train accident.’

His voice contained a tinge of remorse. ‘Edith never let on. We should console her?’

‘She’ll draw more comfort from you, Reuven.’

‘Although, that’s the right thing to do. Well, er...’ Reuven fidgeted in the seat. ‘I feel awkward being alone with Edith.’ He lowered his gaze. ‘She expects something. Please come too, Albert.’

‘You’ll go alone if you love me, Reuven.’

He focused his widening eyes on Albert, who blushed with excitement. ‘I don’t care for her as I do for you, Albert.’

‘Go to her.... Be selfless....’ Albert advanced, encircling the young man. ‘Offer a shoulder for her to cry on....’ He whispered. ‘There’s nothing wrong with that.’

Reuven looked away. ‘Well, er... no.’

‘I can’t offer her that.’ Albert gently turned him around, kissing Reuven’s ruddy lips. ‘You can, Reuven.’ Albert stroked his roommate’s hair, whispering coquettishly, ‘Unlike you, she doesn’t like me.’

From this closeness, they felt each other’s hearts throbbing in unison. They could no longer resist sampling forbidden fruit. He seized Reuven’s hand, guiding him towards the bed. They unbuttoned their shirts, followed by their trousers and undergarments. Their hungry eyes devoured every detail of each other’s bodies: the fan of pubic hair, the muscular contours of the arms and legs, but most important of all, the swelling sex, and its purplish mushroom-shaped head. He pushed Reuven onto the bed, whose legs, like a flowering bud, opened, revealing a lily-white backside, inviting Albert to penetrate it with his fleshy lance. After they had become a beast with two backs, there was a knock on the door, causing Reuven to hide in the wardrobe and Albert to wrap a towel quickly around his waist.

‘Just a moment.’ Albert made sure his roommate was concealed and slowly opened the door.

The footman handed him a sealed envelope and said in a gruff voice, ‘I was told to give this letter to Reuven.’

‘By any chance, is it from a young lady?’

‘Yes.’ The man paused, for he noticed the strewn clothes on the floor. ‘She didn’t tell me her name.’ Albert lowered his gaze, inviting the man to say, ‘Sir, if I may be so bold, the girl was deeply distressed.’ The footman lowered his voice. ‘Tell Reuven I know of a doctor who can help a girl in trouble.’ He hesitated. ‘The doctor’s very discrete.’ The footman looked around, making sure no one else could eavesdrop. ‘And he doesn’t charge more than £6 for the procedure.’

‘Thank you, I’ll tell him,’ said Albert with a nervous snicker, closing the door. He waited for the servant’s departing footsteps to diminish before telling Reuven, ‘It’s safe to come out.’

Reuven emerged from the furniture’s wooden womb.

‘What did you do to Edith?’ asked Albert as he handed him the letter.

‘Nothing.’ He slit the envelope and read. “‘At times, I don’t understand you, Reuven. Why do you mistreat me? I only want to be your friend.’”

Albert snatched the letter away and read, “‘Why can’t you be a friend to me as you are with Albert?’” He laughed. ‘She loves you.’ Albert looked at him strangely. ‘Think of what Edith can do for us.’ Furrows of bewilderment appeared in Reuven’s temples. ‘She’s a rich orphan.’

‘It’s her money you care about!’ said Reuven with rage creeping into his words.

‘I’m not ashamed to admit it. Haven’t you ever considered it, Reuven?’

‘Well, er... no.’

‘Quash your scruples.’

‘She’s done us no harm.’

‘Why are you defending her?’ asked Albert with suspicion.

‘Well, er...’

‘Ah, that’s it.’ He laughed. ‘You secretly love her.’

‘No!’

His stare was like a dagger, cutting deep into Reuven’s heart. ‘Besides, affection’s flower withers when nothing can sustain it.’

With tear-laden eyes, Reuven dressed quickly and walked towards the door. His hand hovered on the doorknob. ‘I’ve never hated you as I do now.’

After uttering his condemnation, the young man exited, leaving Albert in profound shock. It never occurred to Albert that the hunger for money would place him and Reuven on adjacent islands, verging towards opposite ends of the world. He wanted to run after the departing beloved, but his *amour-propre* had nailed his feet to the ground. Albert would wait for Reuven’s return, and then he would unwontedly drop to the ground and beg forgiveness from the idol of his veneration.

Two hours later, there was no sign of Reuven. Then, from the bed on which Albert lay, apprehensively smoking (because of apprehension) countless cigarettes, he heard

the heavy tread of someone staggering up the stairwell, followed by the door creaking open. At the entrance stood Reuven, whose bloodshot eyes and dishevelled appearance showed only one thing: inebriation. Rather than chastise him, Albert helped him to the bed, denuding the young man of his clothes.

‘I care for you more than I do for money. Forgive me, *mon amour*,’ said Albert in a brittle voice, wiping away the torrent of tears that streamed down his face.

Reuven awoke the following morning with a thumping headache and no memory of Albert’s apology, as the alcohol, like the waters of Lethe, had washed it away. In the room’s crypt-like gloom, shafts of light filtered through the cracks in the curtains, enabling Reuven to stagger from the bed to the chair on which his crimson

dressing gown rested. With a languorous movement, he lifted the garment, placing an arm at a time through the sleeves and then wrapped it around before tying the sash together. His eyes skimmed over the wreckage of scattered clothes before stopping at the writing desk, where a finger of light showed his toiletry bag and towel. He grabbed them. Then, with significant effort, he opened the door and lumbered down the corridor towards the communal bathroom. Without warning, Reuven's mouth became watery, followed by an eruption of green slime onto the black-and-white tiled floor, causing his legs to buckle and crumble to the floor. Ashamed, Reuven vowed as he rose from his haunches that his momentary lapse to drunkenness would never happen again. *Whom was he kidding himself or his fellow collegians?* He twisted the brass tap, splashing chilly water onto his face and wiping away the congealed vomit from his mouth with the dressing gown's crimson sleeve.

Half an hour later, Reuven felt refreshed after having taken a bath, so he wandered back, where Albert lay on the bed watching him entering the dorm room with adoration and awkwardness. When he saw Albert, his face changed to a machine-like aloofness. Not uttering a word, Reuven slipped into his clothes. To survive, the young man had to redirect his passions from Albert to academia. Because Reuven must not squander the opportunities afforded him at Occidental University: for the treasured testamur meant economic emancipation, where a Jew (such as he) could move up the ladder of society. Yet it never occurred to him that Albert could slander his reputation, derailing his social aspirations.

Ignorant of the threat to his reputation, Reuven grabbed his satchel of books and walked to the door, daring not to look at Albert for fear of being turned into stone by the gorgon of abjectness. His hand hovered on the doorknob as Albert's siren voice said, 'Don't forget to comfort Edith.' He hesitated before twisting the handle.

‘You owe it to her, Reuven,’ said Albert, as his roommate exited the room.

As Reuven scampered down the steps, his heavy tread reverberated in the cavern-like stairwell like a discharging pistol. Only after entering the courtyard was the sound muted by the chatter of students whose eyes widened as Reuven dashed past them towards the campus. He was unaware his queer behaviour (regarding his relations with Albert) piqued the interest of his fellow collegians, who, in time, would inflate the balloon of scandal before the college Dons would burst it with the threat of expulsion.

Despite that, Reuven’s pace diminished midway to the campus, for he was mesmerised by the music inside the university cathedral. It was not the custom for a Jew to enter another religion’s place of worship; however, he disregarded that custom as he entered the sandstone building. His eyes drifted from the vaulted ceiling to the rainbow of colour streaming through the stained-glass windows before lingering on the open space at the front of the altar, where a small orchestra and choir were grouped.

He slumped on the hard wooden pew, listening as a wave of sound and sublimity passed through his body. Then he heard Edith's familiar voice say, 'It is beautiful music,' as she sat beside him.

They listened in silence for a moment before Reuven asked, 'I'm unfamiliar with this song.' He hesitated, daring not to look at her. 'Please, can you explain it to me?'

'Mozart set his chorale music to the Psalms, in this case, *Laudate Dominum omnes gentes*.' Reuven looked at her with confusion this time, so she translated the lyrics. 'Praise the Lord, all nations.' She stopped. 'Praise Him, all you, people.'

Although the music was empyreal, it engendered uneasiness in Reuven, who feared if he stayed a moment longer, his Jewishness would be erased and replaced by Christian propaganda.

'I shouldn't have come here,' the young man sullenly said. He shot up from the pew and headed to the entrance, triggering Edith to chase after him.

‘Please stop, Reuven.’ He paused, waiting for her to catch up. ‘I should have known.’

‘What should you have known, Edith?’

‘A church is no place for a Jew as it embodies centuries of Christian persecution.’ Reuven smiled, for her insightfulness touched him. ‘Please forgive my fellow Christians?’

‘It is I who should beg for your forgiveness.’ He hesitated, allowing the tension in his throat to lessen. ‘By the way, I mistreated you the other day, Edith.’ She lowered her gaze. ‘Why didn’t you tell me of your mother’s death?’

Prickling with tears, Edith said in a lifeless tone, ‘I didn’t want your pity.’ She stopped and then looked him straight in the face. ‘For I believed that if I told you about Mama’s death, then you would have been obligated to me out of guilt.’ His downcast eyes acknowledged what she said to be true. ‘I don’t want that, Reuven.’ She stopped, then continued with hopelessness. ‘I want your friendship only if you genuinely desire it, too.’

Reuven looked at her strangely. ‘Yes, I want that very much.’ He extended his hand. ‘Let’s shake on it.’ She hesitated before shaking his limp, clammy hand.

After that friendly gesture, they wandered to the library, where they noticed people gathered around the message board reading about the collapse of the world’s largest bank, *Banco Imperio*. Several of them dropped to their knees and wept upon reading about the financial titan’s downfall. Edith was not immune to the effects of this news, for her complexion became colourless.

‘Are you alright?’ asked Reuven, caressing her icy hand.

‘I’ve postponed it for far too long....’ Her legs buckled. ‘I must return to Londinium....’ She buried her face in her hands. ‘And arrange Mama’s funeral.’

‘Don’t worry, Albert and I shall accompany you,’ said Reuven, escorting Edith back to her dormitory.

While walking back, Edith was more concerned about the failure of *Banco Imperio* than arranging Mrs Andley’s

funeral because her family's money was invested in the defunct financial institution. *Perhaps Mama moved some of the capital to another bank?* Edith bit her lip, unwilling to confess to Reuven, for her identity was quintessentially associated with wealth. However, with the possibility of sinking into destitution, Edith felt it was necessary to maintain that former identity to survive. Hence, the dark clouds of fear would have to be purged from the girl's conscience to allow the sun of hope to shine again. So Edith would play the wealthy orphan to the hilt, capturing Albert Sinclair, whose money would maintain her sybaritic lifestyle. Although the girl would have been horrified by her avarice in the past, she now understood the dangers: poverty, she had read in scandal sheets, led women to whoredom—the ultimate social disgrace. Besides, it was more socially acceptable, so Edith thought, to give herself in marriage to Albert even though she did not love him. Furrows formed on her temples, triggering Edith to look away, fearing her mask would splinter into a million pieces before Reuven, whose curiosity was aroused.

‘I’ve never lost a parent yet.’ He hesitated, trying not to upset the young woman. ‘I can’t imagine the hurt you’re experiencing, Edith.’

A half smile formed on her lips. ‘Thank you for your understanding.’ When they reached the sandstone entrance of the dormitory, she added, ‘I’ll go now.’ She stroked his arm. ‘And get ready for tomorrow’s trip.’ Without warning, Edith kissed him, causing the young man to recoil in surprise. ‘I shouldn’t have done that.’ Reuven remained reticent, prompting the girl to say in desperation, ‘Forgive me, I’m still overwrought.’

Neither of them uttered a word in that awkward moment; however, this silence conveyed plenty to Edith that her amorous advances were not reciprocated, making her, so she believed, a reckless girl in the eyes of Reuven. Despite that, Edith nervously fluttered her eyelashes and said her goodbyes. She passed into the sandstone entrance, unaware of the bewildered effect she had stimulated in Reuven. Her plight had moved Reuven, but it also repelled him because the girl had become a paradox.

Dazed, Reuven staggered back, but before he reached his dorm to inform Albert, he dropped onto a wooden bench, burying his face in his hands, for uncertainty coiled around him, squeezing (with its icy grip) the *joie de vivre* from his heart. Minutes had passed before the warmth of confidence revived Reuven, enabling him to leap from the bench and dash down the sandstone avenue of campus buildings. There was too much at stake—Albert’s love—to risk, especially since Reuven had seen the living Adonis’s bare body, for, like white phosphorous exposed to oxygen, the desire to touch Albert again scorched Reuven to his core. Yet, it never occurred to Reuven at the time that he, to his detriment, was a facilitator of Albert’s and Edith’s yearnings, which might or might not include the young antipodean.

After Reuven (drenched in sweat) had reached his dorm’s courtyard, he sprinted up the stairwell, almost colliding with an oncoming footman who mouthed blasphemy under his breath. Halfway up, Reuven froze, for he had spotted Albert descending the stairs, who gestured

him to come closer. Again, uncertainty coiled around Reuven, causing his heart to race like a wild stallion with delight and dread. However, when Albert flashed his pearly whites, the warmth of confidence revived Reuven, triggering the young colonial to bound up the stairs.

Without warning, Albert seized Reuven by the scruff of the neck, pushing him towards their dorm room. Reuven winced in pain, misjudging the dangerous dynamics of their relationship.

‘Tell me everything,’ said Albert, slamming the door behind them.

‘I don’t understand you, Albert.’ He hesitated. ‘It’s as if you are two different people.’ A tear slid down his colourless cheek. ‘Wasn’t it you who wanted me to comfort Edith?’ Albert looked away, provoking Reuven to continue with a simple *cri de coeur*. ‘Out of love, I did what you asked.’

‘Forgive me, *mon chéri*.’ Albert showered him with kisses. ‘I’m afraid of losing you.’

‘She can’t give me what you can,’ said Reuven, stroking his companion’s swelling sex.

‘What did the two of you talk about?’

‘Well, er...’

‘Tell me, Reuven.’ Albert pushed his hand away. ‘Otherwise, I shan’t give it to you.’

‘Edith wants us to escort her to Londinium.’ He hesitated, afraid of upsetting Albert, whose muscular arms now encircled him. ‘So she can arrange the funeral.’

‘Did she do anything else?’

‘Well, er...’

‘Tell me.’

‘Well, er.... It was nothing of which to be jealous, Albert....’

‘Tell me.’

‘As Edith was distraught.... Well, she... er... kissed me.’ Albert’s face was flushed with fury. ‘Please don’t be angry.’ Albert’s nostrils flared, prompting the young antipodean to say in a mollifying voice, ‘Nothing untoward happened, Albert.’

‘Edith’s a bitch in heat.’

‘Please don’t speak ill of her.’ Albert tightened his grip. ‘It’s unbecoming of you to do so now,’ gasped Reuven, uncoupling from Albert’s vicelike arms. ‘Whatever I do to please you, Albert.’ He hesitated, trying to fathom Albert’s ambivalent temperament. ‘I’ll always fail.’ He noticed a flicker of understanding in Albert’s eyes. ‘Because any minor misdemeanour you perceive will fracture your fragile self-worth.’

Albert lowered his head in shame. ‘I’m afraid of losing you to her.’

‘That’ll never happen,’ said Reuven, covering his distressed lover with kisses. ‘If we’ve got each other, then we’ll never need her money.’

‘Ah, I wish that were true,’ said Albert, staggering to his bed before dropping onto the soft mattress. Without warning, Albert’s demeanour switched to sarcastic scorn. ‘However, affection’s flower withers when nothing can sustain it.’

As the train meandered towards the greyish slums of Londinium, Albert and Reuven had (during a few hours) talked in punctuated bursts to Edith, whose eyes noticed the deep furrows and the tense smiles of the two men. Their taciturnity towards each other struck her as odd, indicating a fracture in the men's friendship. Edith was about to articulate her suspicions when she saw a fire raging in a distant tenement building from the carriage window, causing her to gasp in horror. Tears wetted her lashes when she saw people like burning embers fall from the towering inferno onto the cobblestone street below. The air was fetid with the smell of singed flesh, triggering the trio to cover their noses with their scented handkerchiefs.

‘Women and children forced to jump rather than being burnt alive,’ said Edith through interspersed sobs. ‘What’s the world coming to?’

Touched by the sorrowful event, Albert and Reuven reconciled their differences and tried to soothe the weeping woman.

‘It is God’s will that they died,’ said Albert, stroking her tear-stained cheek.

Furrows creased her temples as Edith focused her critical gaze on Albert, for what he had said (when weighed on the scales of morality) tilted it towards callousness.

‘Your heartless words are shocking.’ Albert was about to speak; however, Edith continued with rising rage, ‘They’re an affront to human decency.’

‘Please forgive him,’ said Reuven in a nervous tweet. ‘I’m certain Albert meant no harm.’

Albert lowered his head. ‘Sometimes, I can be tactless, Edith.’ He hesitated, trying to summon compassion. ‘I’d harm no one, especially those I care deeply about. As a gesture of forgiveness.’ His gaze drifted to Reuven for a split second before returning to her. ‘Stay with me at my uncle’s townhouse.’

Uncertainty pressed down on Edith's conscience, crushing her resistance to Albert's offer. His money would prevent her from suffering a similar fate to the impoverished people who leapt to their deaths from the burning tower. When the train moved further along the tracks and the pungent odour of death had dissipated, she removed the handkerchief and said, 'On the condition, Reuven comes too.'

A smile formed on Albert's lips. 'You want that as well, Reuven.' The young colonial reluctantly nodded, triggering Albert's subdued, nervous laugh. 'Excellent. I've already wired for my driver Sims to fetch us from *King's Cross*.'

Drained of colour, Reuven feared Sims would seek vengeance by defaming Reuven's reputation when the odious driver collected them from the station. Hence, he stayed quiet, concentrating his troubled mind on the lively banter between Albert and Edith, whose emotional about-face from despair, followed by anger, and finally to laughter, puzzled the young antipodean. As a rule,

Britannian society was based on concealment that, as Reuven realised, the slightest hint of trouble would wash away the foundations of the upper class, exposing it to ridicule by the impoverished masses, who were now sharpening their swords. So it was no surprise that Edith communicated her desires (in a similar hieroglyphic manner) because if she were forthright with Albert, he might spurn her as Reuven had done previously.

While Albert told puerile witticisms to Edith, whose batting eyelids conveyed to the observant Reuven that she, like Albert, was hiding something. So Reuven focused his gaze onto Edith, noticing how her nostrils flared and how her smile seemed disingenuous, evident in the lack of lines radiating from the corners of each eye. Next, Reuven directed his gaze to the humourist, noting how Albert's facial expressions mirrored Edith's, who, by this stage, was aware that he was scrutinising them.

‘You’ve been awfully quiet, Reuven,’ said the girl, curling her upper lip. ‘Have you anything to say?’

‘Your actions have spoken for themselves, leaving me speechless.’

‘Pray, what do you mean?’ asked Albert, reddening with wrath.

‘Well, er... nothing.’ His gaze drifted to Albert for a split second before returning to her. ‘Please forgive me for having spoken carelessly. Well, you see, Edith.’ His gaze drifted to the approaching *King’s Cross Station* sign before returning to her. ‘I meant you no disrespect.’

‘None was taken.’ She fixed her eyes on him, noting his greenish complexion. ‘Are you alright, Reuven?’

‘No.’ He staggered to his feet. ‘I feel a strangeness surging through my mind.’

‘Quickly, Albert,’ said Edith, gesturing at the trembling Reuven. ‘Catch him before he falls.’

1922

Another roof tile plummeted to the ground, exploding into many shards, causing Reuven to open his eyes. As he rose from the moss-covered bench, his hand knocked the flask, showering alcohol onto the withered weeds that lined the cracks in the pavement. His eyes followed the fractured pathway into the sandstone courtyard, where they lingered on the stairwell that led to his dorm room. Piqued by curiosity, Reuven walked into the yard, then went up the stairwell (his heart pounded with delight and dread), and finally, he reached the room, hand hovering on the doorknob. With a firm twist, Reuven entered, ducking as a flock of pigeons flew past him. Once the disturbed dust had settled, the middle-aged man drew apart the tattered curtains, allowing a stream of light to invade the room, revealing after so many years the study desks, chairs, wardrobe, and (how could he forget) the bed on which Reuven was deflowered.

Flushed with excitement, Reuven slumped onto the mattress, wishing the god Aeon⁷ would loop the present with the past in a temporal cycle, allowing the mature man to repeatedly experience Albert's touch. Yet, time was governed by Chronos⁸, who (no matter how Reuven wanted it) would never upset the transition from the past to the present, nor, for that matter, to the future. A spring of sorrow trickled from his eyes, for Reuven realised his youth, like his love for Albert, was consigned to history. What could he do but wade deeper into the swamp of abjection?

For thirty years, suicide lurked like a monster in Reuven's mind. Now he had returned to the pale-yellow room (a place of so much joy and sorrow), the monster burst forth like a caged beast, tearing his precious memories to pieces. Death seemed to the trembling middle-aged man a welcomed escape from losing Albert

⁷ Unlike Chronos, the god Aeon is associated with perpetual, unbounded, ritual, cyclical time, in which the future is a returning version of the past.

⁸ Unlike Aeon, the god Chronos is associated with the linear progression of historical time, i.e. the past, present and future.

and witnessing the destruction of civilisation. Hence, Reuven rose from the bed, wiping his tear-stained face with the back of his jacket. The shafts of sunlight beckoned him towards the window. His eyes narrowed, observing the transition of white light into a spectrum of colours, stimulating a somnambulistic trance in Reuven, who edged closer, unbolting the latches; he pushed the window open. Reuven climbed onto the windowsill, preparing to jump. However, he froze, for Albert's phantom voice said, 'It's not your time yet.'

1892

While Edith fanned the feverish Reuven, a steward, who had been informed of the medical incident by Albert, pushed the train's compartment door open, allowing a doctor and two ambulance attendants access. As Reuven drifted in and out of consciousness, he heard Edith implore in muffled moans, 'Stay awake, Reuven.' She kissed his forehead. 'For the love of God, stay awake.'

Distraught, Edith embraced Albert, who appeared like a smooth expanse of water, not letting on that his stomach was a knot of worry. When Reuven was placed on a stretcher (to Albert's and Edith's horror), his eyes jerked open, and then he convulsed like a rabid dog, triggering the heavy-set ambulance attendants to push him back. A crazed expression spread across Reuven's face, followed by a guttural scream, 'Keep that devil of a man away from me.'

'Hold him down,' said the ashen-haired doctor, withdrawing a syringe and a phial of morphine from his leather bag.

'Say something, Albert.' Sorrow surged through her body. 'Tell me, he'll be alright.' Albert looked at his writhing friend, trying not to betray his emotions. 'Why are you quiet?' He hesitated. 'Wasn't Reuven your friend?'

'He means more to me than you can imagine,' said Albert with ascending animosity. At that moment, he would have struck Edith for having the temerity to question

his ardour for Reuven, who, by this stage, was sedated, slipping into a restful sleep.

While they carried Reuven away, Edith seized the doctor's hand. 'What's the matter with him?'

'It's hard for me to say.' Moved by her tear-filled eyes, the doctor reassured the weeping woman. 'Don't worry, Miss.' However, she saw a glint of reluctance in his gaze, igniting more concern in Edith, who tightened her hold. 'Fear not, my fellow doctors and I at Bethlehem Hospital....' He uncoupled her hand from his. 'Will sort him out.' The doctor looked at Albert before returning to her. 'Miss, if you don't mind....' He gestured to the station platform. 'Please wait outside while I have a word with your friend.'

Rather than challenge his command, Edith retreated to the platform, where she watched with narrowing eyes the doctor and Albert moving to the other end of the carriage.

'Is your friend neurotic?'

'Whom do you mean, doctor?'

‘The patient...’ He lowered his voice. ‘Does he have a history of hysteria?’

‘Oh, no,’ said Albert, whose voice became concerned. ‘Now I come to think of it.... Sometimes, Reuven’s high-strung.’ His gaze drifted to the far-off Edith briefly before returning to the doctor. ‘That is to be expected for a university student.’

‘Ah, that could be it.’ The ashen-haired doctor scrutinised Albert, whose nostrils flared slightly. ‘But one mustn’t overlook other causes.’ The doctor observed the young man’s evasive eyes darting from the floor to the carriage window in rapid bursts this time. ‘Do you know what they could be?’

Mortified by the medical man’s probing question, Albert looked away. ‘Well, er.’ A garland of sweat gathered on Albert’s temples as he tried to obfuscate the real reason: his and Reuven’s homosexuality. ‘Well, doctor....’ His gaze drifted to the far-off Edith, who swayed with crossed arms before returning to the doctor. ‘Between you and me....’ Albert took a handkerchief from

his pocket, patting his forehead dry, then lowered his voice. 'Reuven's Jewish and a tad sensitive about his faith.'

'I'll bear that in mind.' The doctor glanced at Edith and continued with a smile. 'I shan't detain you from your lady friend a moment longer.' The ashen-haired man handed Albert a business card on which was written in copperplate:

Dr Thomas Drysdale, M.D.

Resident Psychiatrist

Bethlehem Hospital.

Then he scurried away, leaving Albert perplexed in how to explain this to Edith, whose eyes followed the retreating medical man. Therefore, Albert would have to apply a lacquer of obfuscation to the tableau that Drysdale had painted about Reuven: for the truth must be obscured to protect the young woman and himself.

'What did the doctor say?' asked Edith as he approached from the train.

‘Well, er...’ His voice quivered with apprehension. ‘It’s nothing of which to be concerned.’

‘There’s more reason to be worried,’ she stopped, looked at Albert directly, and said, ‘Reuven’s illness is abnormal.’

As they drew closer to the train station’s entrance, Albert snickered, ‘You needn’t trouble your mind about that.’

Rather than pacifying her worries, Albert’s words had the opposite effect, for she was a cauldron of rage that threatened to boil over.

‘Don’t insult my intelligence, Albert.’ She seized his hand, preventing him from exiting the building. ‘What did the doctor say?’

‘He told me it was exhaustion.’

‘Exhaustion?’ She tightened her hold. ‘That’s hard to believe....’ A glazed expression came over Albert’s countenance, prompting the young woman to continue frantically. ‘I’ve seen in Reuven’s eyes the same look as

my uncle.... It pains me to say it.... Before my beloved uncle killed himself.'

Upon hearing her revelation, the young man's complexion lost its lustre, becoming as colourless and cold as marble. Hence, he suppressed his sorrow by pushing Edith to the entrance, who was perplexed by his aloofness.

'Where did they take Reuven?' He hesitated, causing Edith to bombard him with more questions. 'To a hospital or an asylum?' He stayed silent, further infuriating Edith, who, as one can imagine, was about to explode like Krakatoa with a deafening scream. 'For the love of God, say something.'

Again Albert would have struck her if there had not been a crowd of onlookers; however, he crushed this violent impulse by gesturing to Sims, who stood by the motor awaiting them. The ginger sideburns driver leapt into action by opening the vehicle's door and attaching their valises to its exterior rack.

‘Sir, we better hurry,’ said Sims, with a timbre of anxiety. An echo of gunfire in the distance triggered the driver to explain. ‘Before the protesters arrive.’

Once seated, the metallic beast jerked forward, speeding past the ashen-faced street urchins who gathered along the thoroughfare selling God-knows-what to the unsuspecting tourists.

‘Why are they rallying?’ asked Edith, eager to know more about the upheavals happening in Londinium.

‘Well, Miss.’ The driver dithered, afraid of the repercussions of speaking candidly. ‘They’re objecting about their living conditions....’

‘That’s enough, Sims.’ Albert’s complexion resembled a ripe tomato. ‘Edith and I don’t want to hear about that.’

‘Speak for yourself, Albert.’

‘Don’t trouble your mind about them, Edith.’ The young woman was about to voice her concern when Albert continued with a voice devoid of empathy. ‘One feels sorry

for the poor.’ She looked away in disgust. ‘Besides, it’s God’s will they endure poverty.’

She returned his gaze. ‘Are you made of stone?’

‘Of course not, Edith.’

‘Have you forgotten about the people who jumped from the burning building?’ He shook his head. ‘Have you forgotten our dear friend, Reuven?’ He shook his head again. ‘I’m tired of being kept in the dark.... Mama.... God bless her... did that when she was alive... Please don’t do that to me now, Albert.’

He lowered his head in shame, for her words cut deep into his psyche, revealing for the first time the danger of surrendering one’s soul to avaricious ambition—everlasting damnation. Notwithstanding, the weight of Uncle Cecil’s expectations for Albert to marry the wealthy orphan was impossible for the young man to dislodge from his overburdened conscience. In one swift movement, Albert’s hand reached upward, removing the imagined collar of destitution from his throat.

‘I shall never conceal the facts from you,’ said Albert with a deep exhalation, then added tenderly, ‘I’m concerned about your fragile state, Edith.... For now, there are some things you mustn’t know yet.’

Rather than extinguishing Edith’s inquisitiveness, his words had the opposite effect, for they engendered wilful scepticism in the young woman. She was about to express her worries when Albert said, ‘First things first, you must arrange your beloved mother’s funeral.... My uncle and I will help....’ He hesitated, noticing a flush of resentment in her face. ‘Afterwards, you can focus on other pressing issues, like Reuven....’

Edith held her tongue as the motor sped along the street, but she would later telephone Templeton (her mother’s lawyer), who would inform her if she were financially ruined. Depending on the answer, she would marry or part ways with Albert.

Meanwhile, on the other side of Londinium, the drugged Reuven was admitted to the psychiatric ward. In that altered state, Reuven, in a muffled breath, blurted his fear of being exposed by Sims, who had now driven Albert and Edith to their destination. Thankfully, no one was in the white padded room to overhear his avowal. Then the young man's babblings stopped, for he had mentally escaped the confines of the urine-scented room, wandering across the oceans of time and space. In this ethereal realm, he saw Donatello's famed statue in the distance. His lust to touch the bronze figure propelled him onwards. To his delight, Reuven, rather than seeing the biblical King David, saw the naked Albert with a sword in one hand. As Reuven followed the contours of the bare body, he flinched in horror when he saw Albert's foot resting on Edith's severed head.

A moment later, a miasmic mist swirled around Reuven, overriding his senses with its putrid perfume,

leaving him struggling to breathe. Then he heard Drysdale's voice saying, 'Awake, Reuven.'

The doctor removed the smelling salts from the young man's nostrils.

'Where am I?' asked Reuven in a state of confusion, jerking forward.

The young antipodean's myopia gradually diminished, enabling him to scan the room and deduce (by the room's white padded walls) that he was in a psychiatric ward.

He seized the physician's hand. 'Do you believe I am crazy?'

A smile formed on Drysdale's face. 'No, I don't.' The doctor gently removed his hand. 'However, something or someone sparked your emotional outburst.' A wave of worry washed over the patient, prompting Drysdale to say reassuringly, 'At this stage, I want to discover the cause.' A crown of sweat trickled down the young man's face. 'There's nothing of which to be afraid, Reuven.' He paused. 'My motive is to help you overcome this

malady.... And become a valued member of society once more.'

He looked at Drysdale with a strange, bewitching stare, after which the young man turned his attention to the barred overhead window from which streamed the golden rays of the afternoon sun.

At that exact moment, on the other side of Londinium, Albert entered the wallpapered drawing-room of sage green poppies where Uncle Cecil, awaiting his nephew's return, stood beside the window, watching a flock of birds traversing the amber sky. When he heard Albert's approaching tread, the old man turned around and asked in a gruff voice, 'Where's Edith?'

'The train trip exhausted her, so she went to bed.'

‘Perhaps that’s for the better.’ Cecil gestured at two chairs whose background wall had more rectangle shadows where once hung prized pictures. ‘Sit. I want to talk to you.’ He waited for Albert to be seated. ‘What did Edith tell you?’

‘Well, er.... She was more concerned with Reuven.’

Uncle Cecil, like a predacious shark, circled him. ‘Reuven? Who’s he?’

‘A mutual friend to Edith and me.’

‘I see...’ He stopped walking. ‘Is Reuven a threat to you winning the girl’s affection?’

Albert said in a nervous tweet, ‘Oh, no.... Far from it....’

‘I disagree, Albert....’ He resumed walking around his nephew, who was cognisant of the threat the aged man posed. ‘Because, as you say, Edith was more concerned about Reuven, it indicates her love for him.’

‘If that’s the case.... Reuven could never reciprocate her love.’ Cecil arched a sceptical brow, prompting the nephew to explain. ‘Because he loves an’ - an’ another....’

‘And where’s Reuven?’ The old man slumped into the adjacent upholstered chair. ‘I need to assess him for myself.’

‘Ah, that might be a bit of a challenge.’

‘What do you mean, Albert?’

‘He’s a patient at the Bethlehem Hospital.’

‘Isn’t that a lunatic asylum?’

His ears pricked up when Albert heard the muffled tread of footsteps descending the stairs. ‘For the love of God, say not a word to Edith. She mustn’t know,’ said Albert with a finger on his lips.

A moment later, she stood at the drawing-room’s entrance. ‘Uncle Cecil and I were talking about you.’ He hesitated. ‘We wondered how you’re feeling now, Edith.’

‘Please accept my condolences, dear child.’ Cecil rose from his chair and walked towards Edith, who approached him with a wavering smile, for his contrived candour had, so he thought, hoodwinked her.

‘Your mother Catherine was a wonderful woman,’ he said, kissing her stony countenance. ‘She’ll be sadly

missed.’ He gestured at the chair. ‘Please sit down...’ His gaze drifted to Albert for a brief time before returning to her. ‘I’ll leave the two of you alone.’

‘I’m forever indebted to the kindness you’ve shown me.’ Cecil bowed his head in reverence. Yet before he had exited the room, he heard Edith’s dulcet voice. ‘Before you go, may I ask a favour?’ The older man’s upper lip curled upward. ‘May I use your telephone?’

‘Of course, young lady,’ said Cecil with a deep sigh, then added tenderly, ‘I regard you as much as I do any other family member.’

Before the mature man exited the room, he looked at the twosome inexplicably and closed the door behind him. Silence shrouded the room before a faint laugh from Albert interrupted it.

‘Uncle Cecil’s taken a bit of a shine to you, Edith. He isn’t like that with any other house guest.’

‘I’m flattered,’ said the girl, adjusting her lace collar.

As the room darkened, Albert rose from his chair and ambled to the light switch, and with a downward flick, the

electric bulbs turned on, revealing (to Edith) rectangle shadows on the sage green wallpaper. In hindsight, the young woman should have connected the ghostly impressions (where paintings once hung) with the owner selling them for money; however, she thought nothing of it.

When Albert returned to his chair, he flashed his pearly whites at Edith, who, unlike Reuven, was unsure whether to love him. Yet, she was now prepared to overlook this perceived fault until Templeton assured her about her financial fate. However, if Edith was reduced to poverty, she would wed Albert regardless of whether she loved him because she would only whore herself to one man rather than a floozy who sold herself to multitudes. She sat deep in thought until Albert punctured the balloon of taciturnity with a nervous laugh.

‘You’re quiet, Edith. Are you away with the fairies?’

‘When can I see Reuven?’

‘Ah, it’s too soon.... Maybe a week or two, depending on what the doctors say... Believe me... Reuven’s

receiving the best care,' said Albert with a tremor of apprehension, followed by earnestness. 'Besides, shouldn't you focus on the funeral?'

'Of course,' said Edith with a raised, cynical brow. 'I'm worried about him.' The girl leapt from the chair as if it were a hotplate. 'Aren't you, Albert?'

'Don't presume to think I don't care,' said Albert, whose face was flushed with fury, which caused her to flinch in surprise. 'Reuven's the best friend I'll ever have.'

Edith inwardly told herself, *I'm more a friend to Reuven than you'll ever be.*

However, she stood frozen, daring not to inflame the tension. Once Edith believed it was safe, she resumed in a conciliatory tone. 'Please forgive my flippancy.' She noticed his downcast gaze, which suggested to the young woman he was ashamed. 'If you don't mind, Albert,' said Edith with a wavering smile. 'Please direct me to the telephone.'

‘Yes, Edith.’ The young man rose from the chair, ambling towards the door, then gestured. ‘Come, it’s this way.’

They meandered down a vista of enfiladed rooms, the oriental-inspired dining room that (according to Edith’s aestheticism) clashed with the Gothic-themed library, highlighting a carelessness in interior design. As they advanced, the gold-embossed books that lined the library’s shelves shimmered under the overhanging electric lights. Beyond that was the telephone.

Though Sinclair had (so she believed) money, they were deficient in style, which she (through marriage) could offer them in spades. However, the girl’s decision rested on what Templeton would say.

‘Do you mind leaving, Albert?’ asked Edith in a firm tone.

The young man slinked away without saying a word, leaving the girl alone. However, from the vantage point of the library, Albert strained his ears to hear what was being said. Through the modulating pitch of her voice, Albert

learnt she was talking to a man named Templeton, whom she would see the following day. His eyes lit up, for he realised that a well-regarded law firm was founded by Templeton. From this information, Albert conjectured Edith would inquire about the money the late Mrs Andley left to her. Hence, Albert moved with stealth-like swiftness to the drawing-room, where he would lie in ambush.

A moment later, he heard the soft tread of passing footsteps, but before they could ascend the stairs, he called out, 'Edith, be so good as to come here.' The door emitted a mouse-like squeak as Edith pushed it further ajar and entered the room. 'I trust your telephone conversation was fruitful?' He paused, noting the girl's complexion dimming in its radiant hue. 'Why, you look ghastly....' He gestured at the chair. 'Come, sit...'

'I'm weakened by Mama's death....' She staggered to the chair, slumping into its upholstered softness. 'Not to mention the legality of the funeral.'

'That's understandable,' said Albert with measured civility.

‘I don’t mean to be an imposition.’ She stopped, then asked with a honeyed voice, ‘Can your driver take me into the city tomorrow?’

‘Are you sure it’s safe to go alone? Especially with the unrest happening in Londinium.’

‘I shan’t be,’ said Edith with a deep groan, then added insistently, ‘as the driver will accompany me.’

‘Ah, Sims doesn’t count.... He’s a servant... Unlike family, which my uncle and I regard you as an honorary member.’ He looked at her queerly. ‘I, therefore, insist on coming with you.’ Albert noticed lines of discomfiture forming on her brow. ‘Is that all right?’

‘Of course, Albert,’ said Edith with a clenched jaw. ‘If you don’t mind, I wish to go to bed.’

The young woman sashayed away, leaving Albert to pace the room alone, trying to decipher her cryptic behaviour. Never in a million years would he equate Edith’s dire pecuniary predicament with his own, for it seemed ridiculous to himself, not to mention Britannian

society, who would regard their nuptial union as a tragic comedy. Therefore, everything hinged on what Templeton disclosed to Edith, for his words would either liberate or condemn the girl to marriage.

Edith, exhausted after a sleepless night of worry, saw her reflection in the morning light and stumbled to her feet in horror. She noticed dark circles under her eyes in the looking glass, ruining her prized features. Social etiquette frowned upon virtuous women (unlike actresses and cocottes) covering up their facial flaws with powder and paint; however, Edith ignored this rule in favour of vanity. After dressing, Edith cleansed her face with soap and water, patting it dry; she applied cold cream to the face and neck, wiping away the excess and then dusting it with white powder.

Now presentable, Edith descended the stairs and ambled into the dining room. Uncle Cecil and Albert sat at a table filled with plates of scrambled eggs, sausages, kippers, and bread rolls. The elderly man's face reddened with disgust when he saw Edith, because the girl's cosmetics were apparent rather than undetectable. Usually, Cecil would have chastised female relatives for the effrontery of using powder and paint to modify their appearance; however, as Edith was not a relation, the old man said, 'Your face has an unnatural tint.' However, Cecil's unwonted cordiality did not last, for he lashed the girl's confidence with a hurtful remark. 'It's not too dissimilar to an actress or worse, a—'

Albert glared at him. 'Shush, uncle.'

'No! I shan't be silenced in my house.' He scowled at Albert before returning to her. 'Do you wish to be thought of as a reckless girl?'

'What do you mean, sir?'

He pointed his wrinkled hand at the chair. ‘Come, sit.’ Cecil paused to allow the girl to take her seat. ‘Now I’ll tell you.’

‘That’s enough, uncle.’

She gestured for Albert to be quiet. Cecil made an emotional about-face and continued with a façade of fatherly worry.

‘At present, you’re an orphan... Please think of me as if I were your parent, Edith.’ He hesitated. ‘As a parent, I must warn you about the dangers young ladies are confronted with....’ He reached out to stroke her supple, youthful hand. ‘Albert and I care about you.... I can see in your face that my previous words have upset you, dear child... Please forgive me.’

Albert rolled his eyes from side to side, for he was surprised by the level of false sincerity his uncle directed at the girl who amazingly lapped up the old man’s honeyed words. Unable to tolerate this a moment longer, he started to speak.

‘Shh, let me finish, Albert.’ Cecil returned his gaze to her. ‘Dearest child... A woman’s value is placed on her virtue.... If she were to change her appearance artificially.... It would call into question her virtue....’ Edith grasped what he was hinting at, causing her head like a flower to droop from scorching shame. ‘Remember that when venturing outside today.’

‘Please excuse me for a moment,’ said Edith, who dashed from the room with tear-stained cheeks.

‘That’s completely uncalled for, uncle.’

‘Well, the girl had it coming.’

‘What a fool you are, old man.’ Albert paused, then whispered, ‘Your callous words may hinder my attempts to wed her.’

‘I doubt it.’ Cecil drew a document from his jacket pocket. ‘Look, Albert.’ The young man’s eyes widened, for he saw imprinted in copperplate lettering *The Last Will & Testament of Catherine Andley*. He tried to snatch it from Cecil. ‘Uh-uh. You’ll have no problems convincing the girl to marry.’ The old man put it back into the jacket’s

pocket, smiling as he resumed, ‘Besides, she’ll be the one to pursue you, Albert.’

‘What do you mean?’ His uncle remained tight-lipped, inviting Albert to enquire further. ‘How can you be sure she will?’

‘Uh-uh. You mustn’t know, Albert.’ They heard the tread of approaching footsteps. ‘Shh, here she comes.’

Edith entered, daring not to look at the older man who had caused her so much pain. Instead, she directed her gaze at Albert, who was shocked by her washed-out complexion, preferring the artifice of powder and paint. The young man handed her a plate of food. Edith pushed the scrambled eggs around her plate with her fork, trying not to look at the sausage that smelt garlicky and buttery. She could not eat a bite, for her mind swirled with rage, and then she pushed it away.

‘Isn’t it to your liking, Edith?’ asked Albert with a hint of worry.

The girl remained circumspect, weighing her words on the scales of decorum before she hazarded an answer.

Yet the longer she stayed silent, the more Albert grew troubled; for that reason, the young man ignited the conversational torch.

‘The Times warns of food and fuel shortages... Not only in Britannia, but around the world.... Inflation, they write, is soaring upwards. The newspaper reports Luddites destroying factory machines to support the lower classes who are revolting everywhere.’

‘I pity them,’ said Edith, looking guiltily at her plateful of food. ‘My problems are insignificant when compared to theirs.’ She stopped and then gestured at the room’s contents. ‘Aren’t you afraid they’ll take all this from you, Albert?’

‘No, he isn’t,’ said Cecil with scorn. ‘The army will crush them if they do.... Dearest child, social position protects us from the gutter rats. Anyhow, it isn’t your place to question society.’

‘Don’t patronise me. Too many men have done that,’ said Edith, pounding her clenched hand on the table. ‘As a woman, I’m fully aware of my place.’ She cast a furious

gaze at him when she rose from her seat. ‘Your words a moment ago have reminded me of it.’

‘Young lady, I shan’t tolerate your insolence any longer.’ He pointed at the door. ‘Get out of my sight.’

With his caustic words reverberating, the girl dashed out of the room.

‘Shut up, uncle.’ Albert leapt from his chair, following her up the stairs. ‘Wait for me, Edith.’ When Albert caught up, he seized her hand. ‘Forget what Uncle Cecil had said... He’s an old blockhead.’

‘I shan’t, Albert,’ said Edith, uncoupling her hand from his. ‘Why do you tolerate him?’

The young man looked away, daring not to confess. *Because I don’t have a penny to my name.*

Edith was not obtuse, for she observed a tremor of apprehension on his rose-petal lips. ‘You’re afraid of the old man and what he’ll do.’ Before Albert could respond, she put her finger on his mouth. ‘I can put an end to his tyrannical rule. Just say the word, and I shall.’ His smile widened. ‘Get the motor ready while I fetch my purse.’

He nodded, then descended the stairs where Sims hovered near the entrance, awaiting the young man's arrival. Before Albert opened his mouth, the ginger sideburns driver said gruffly, 'Mr Sinclair hasn't paid me for two months. Do you know when he will?'

'Well, er...' Albert shifted his weight from one foot to another. 'I'll remind my uncle.' As Edith descended the stairs, Albert pushed the fat driver towards the front door. 'See to the motor, Sims.'

He scorched Albert and the approaching Edith with his stare. Bowing his head, the driver said, 'Yes, sir.'

While Sims took care of the vehicle, the girl could not help but remark. 'Didn't you notice how the driver looked at us?' She paused, then whispered, 'It was pure contempt.' Edith grasped her neck. 'He's as bad as your uncle.'

Albert shrugged his shoulders in a feeble attempt at dissimulation, for he knew full well what Edith had observed was accurate.

'He's harmless, Edith,' said Albert in a vapid drawl as they exited the townhouse.

Hence, Albert would sprinkle fairy dust into Edith's eyes, making her less likely to question him because he did not want to confess to her that the Sinclair family was worryingly close to bankruptcy, evident in the unpaid Sims, who stood, arms folded, beside the iron beast, watching their approach petulantly. The driver uncrossed his arms, jerking the motor's door open, and once they were seated, he slammed it shut.

‘Where to, sir?’

‘624 Bishopsgate,’ said Edith with a trill of nervousness.

‘Hmm, I don't know where in Bishopsgate that is.’ The fat driver turned around, sizing the girl up. ‘Perhaps if you told me the name of the business?’

‘Templeton & Associates.’

‘Oh, yes, I remember now.’ He returned his gaze to the road ahead, pushing his foot on the accelerator as he said with a scowl, ‘I drove Mr Sinclair there a couple of months ago.’

Albert and Edith were unaware of the impending danger as the vehicle and the world hurtled towards their destiny. All that Edith could think of as the iron beast sped along the cobblestone streets was what Templeton would say to her. The thought of being *penniless* caused the girl to shield her face from Albert's penetrative eyes, which glistened like sapphires in the morning shine. Nevertheless, Albert noted her quivering mouth, muttering something under her breath, and her clenched fists. He equated these physical manifestations as nothing more than a daughter's grief for her deceased mother. Yet the world in which Edith and Albert inhabited was constructed upon a fragile frame that the hint of scandal, especially one involving lack of money or deviant desires, could fracture it to a million shards.

While the motor dashed to Bishopsgate, Albert and Edith stayed silent, merely watching the world pass them by in a blur of colour. In the distance, they heard the rumble of gunshots, followed by a surge of dishevelled

rioters (with snapdragons and placards in their hands) running towards them.

‘Christ all mighty,’ said Sims, slamming his foot on the brakes, trailed by the sulphurous stench of burnt tyres.

The protesters froze, forming a barrier between themselves and the police, who raised their batons, prompting the rabble to tear stones from the road with which they pelted the police. In that heated moment, the mob was pushed back, encircling the motor whose occupants saw their eyes glaring at them. Because of centuries of subjugation, the demonstrators (baying for blood) pounded the vehicle’s chassis. Then, their dirty hands tried to drag Edith and Albert from the motor, causing it to rock back and forth in the revolutionary uproar.

‘Drive! Damn you, drive through them!’ cried Albert with a fluster of desperation.

Sims slammed his foot on the accelerator, separating the mob like a ship’s bow in two. The loud thud of bodies flying through the air caused Edith to cover her ears;

however, this was futile because she heard their guttural screams a moment later. Ahead, the road was lined by policemen waving the driver onward instead of arresting him for dangerous driving. Sims saw the police (with raised batons) charge at the protestors in the dash mirror. Their skulls, like watermelons, were smashed to pulp by the wooden weapons. On this morning, social inequality had metastasised to where the elites tried to amputate the cancerous appendage that was the lower class. Their lives, unlike the wealthy, were expendable.

As Sims drove the vehicle along Bishopsgate, with its impressive sandstone buildings, he was painfully aware of his insignificance compared to his passengers. Any day now, the fat driver could, like worn-out shoes, be discarded by Mr Sinclair. Regardless, Sims recognised in Edith someone capable of compassion towards the less fortunate. Hence, the driver would manipulate the girl, lessening her heavy purse, which he believed was overflowing with gold. This was easier said than done, because Sims saw her disdain in the dash mirror as he parked the motor outside

the austere Templeton building. Edith jerked the door open rather than allow the ginger sideburns driver to do so: further validating Sims' supposition that she disliked him.

‘Wait. I shan’t be too long,’ said she to Albert, ignoring the driver whose gaze followed her to the building’s entrance.

The young man could not help but emit a light chuckle. ‘She can sometimes be as prickly as a cactus.’ Without thinking, Albert justified her boorish behaviour towards the subordinate driver. ‘That is to be expected for an heiress.’

Instead of stirring a laugh from Sims, which Albert had hoped, it resulted in unsettling silence punctuated by grinding teeth. Albert glanced at the Templeton building as Edith entered the solicitor’s office.

Although the office was nondescript and devoid of the beauty that interior design adds to a room, its dullness served a function: *Templeton & Associates* was not an ostentatious but a forthright organisation. Behind a large oak desk, on which were many files, sat Mr Templeton. Flushed with worry, the solicitor leafed through the files, pausing to read their titles, and after he had found the correct document, gestured for the girl to sit in the chair facing the desk, then read it to Edith, who leant forward because of his muffled voice. Her forehead was creased with impatience as the solicitor droned on. Still, he had not mentioned whether she was financially ruined.

‘Fear not, Miss Andley.’ Templeton paused and then smiled. ‘You’re well provided for.’ She raised a sceptical brow, prompting the man to explain, ‘Dear young lady, your fortune hasn’t diminished, but increased.’

‘How?’

A smile spread across his face as Templeton recounted the dead woman’s monetary manoeuvres to Edith. ‘Your mother was an astute capitalist. She knew

about the financial state of *Banco Imperio*. So, she transferred her funds to other banks.’ He hesitated, then laughed. ‘What she did next, I wish I had considered it.’

‘What was that, Mr Templeton?’

‘She short-sold *Banco Imperio* stock,’ said the solicitor, employing more trading terminology to explain the late Mrs Andley’s acumen for investing.

Edith tried to assemble the jigsaw puzzle of what he had said, but the business jargon perplexed her.

‘Well, er... I don’t understand, Mr Templeton.’ She tilted her head inquiringly. ‘What does that mean in plain English?’

‘She bet against the bank and won.’

‘How much did she make?’

‘The late Mrs Andley quadrupled her capital,’ said Templeton, causing the young woman’s eyes to bulge slightly from their sockets. His voice wavered when he reached the last page of the document, for what he said next would trigger ambiguity in Edith’s mind.

‘There’s a clause in your mother’s will,’ said Templeton with a deep exhalation, then added worriedly, ‘I, Catherine Jane Andley, bequeath all my assets to my daughter, Edith Mary Andley, on the condition that she marries Albert Sinclair within a year of my death.’

Like a tense spring, the young woman leapt from the chair, snatching the papers from the solicitor’s shaking hands. As she repeatedly read the clause, confusion and anger coloured her countenance a flaming red. It never seemed conceivable to the trembling girl that her mother was cruel, yet it was reflected in the document’s bold letters.

‘I’m much surprised as you, Edith.’ He glanced uncomfortably at the girl, who sunk back into the chair. ‘However, the late Mrs Andley insisted on adding the clause.’

‘I’ll challenge it in the courts.’

‘You can’t, young lady.’ He reached over, snatching the document back. ‘I’ve already broken legal protocols by

allowing you to see Mrs Andley's last will.' He hesitated. 'When she hasn't been buried yet.'

Edith rose from the chair and staggered to the door. Her hand hovered on the brass handle, jerked it open, and exited the room without uttering a farewell to Templeton, whom she viewed as an enemy.

Meanwhile, in the damp and dreary Bethlehem Hospital, Reuven lay outstretched (a modern psychiatric custom) on a *chaise longue*. Dr Drysdale gently probed his patient's mind, hoping to uncover repressed memories. Yet, try as he might, Drysdale hit a barrier that the patient had unconsciously constructed. For whatever these repressed memories were, they (as Drysdale deduced) must be deplorable – enough to warrant a prison sentence. Hence, he watched the patient, observing any telltale signs of homosexuality, for instance, effeminacy in speech and

manner. Regardless, Drysdale detected nothing deviating from the masculine standard in the patient; however, the doctor changed his mode of analysis.

‘Why did you say, “Keep that devil of a man away from me”?’ Reuven shrugged, prompting the psychiatrist to continue his inquisition. ‘To whom were you referring? Me, or someone else?’

‘Well, er... not you, Dr Drysdale.... I don’t want to talk about the other person.’

‘Why not? Do they have some sway over you, Reuven?’

‘Well, er yes... I believe so.’ Reuven paused, then said in a muffled voice, ‘He may publicise my relationship with someone I adore more than life itself.’

‘Tell me about your beloved.’ He noticed a wave of worry wash over the patient’s face. ‘Does she come from a different class or religion?’

‘Er, yes... He... I mean... She is a rich gentile.’

‘You’ve told me enough to conclude,’ said Drysdale, jotting down his findings and closing Reuven’s patient record.

No two ways about it. Reuven is a homosexual, evident in his evasive behaviour, not to mention the Freudian slip he made.

‘You think I’m crazy? Don’t you, Dr Drysdale?’

‘I wouldn’t say you’re crazy.’ A smile spread across Reuven’s lips, relieved at not being labelled insane; however, this evaporated when the doctor said in a clinical tone, ‘Yet I wouldn’t say you’re normal.’ The ashen-haired psychiatrist paused before announcing his diagnosis. ‘I believe you suffer from sexual inversion, common to all homosexuals.’

Reuven sprang bolt upright from the *chaise longue*, revealing his teeth in a snarl, ‘No, that’s a lie.’

Unperturbed by his patient’s histrionics, Drysdale said in a soothing voice. ‘Then tell me who you’re afraid of.’

‘I can’t.’ Reuven dropped back on the *chaise longue*, covering his face out of shame. ‘He’ll blackmail me and my lover,’ said the young man with a deep groan, then added fearfully, ‘He may report us to the police.’

‘If you want to be cured, tell me who your lover is?’

‘I can’t, Dr Drysdale,’ said the young man, wiping his tears with his sleeve. ‘Are you going to inform the authorities?’

‘No, Reuven.’ The ashen-haired psychiatrist moved closer to Reuven and offered a comforting pat on the shoulder, as would a parent whose child was afraid of the bogeyman. ‘I’ll try to cure you of this perversion instead. If you want that too?’ The patient nodded. ‘I’ll consult the literature to find a suitable method.’

‘You’re in too deep to back out now, Templeton,’ said Cecil to the voice on the other end of the line. While

Templeton droned on about the ethics, not to mention the legality of inserting the dubious clause, Cecil rolled his eyes in contempt. Unable to contain his fury a moment longer, Cecil warned, 'Need I remind you of the photographs linking you with the Cleveland Street brothel, an infamous haunt for sodomites?' There was silence at the other end, followed by deep sobs. 'Stop your blubbering. It's unmanly.' Once more, silence returned at the other end, prompting Cecil to say reassuringly, 'I'll give you the photographs once Albert has married Edith.' The sound of approaching footsteps caused Cecil to quickly spit out, 'We'll discuss this later. I've got to go.'

The aged man slammed the telephone receiver down and spun around, where he spotted two figures entering the sunlit drawing-room. Cecil crept like a panther, stopping outside the entrance, listening to their conversation. He heard Edith sobbing, interspersed by Albert saying, 'There, there.'

Fearful his plans had gone awry, Cecil poked around the corner to witness what had happened. He observed

them with dismay, noting how Edith bent forward in her chair, face buried in her hands, while Albert sat in the opposite chair in silence. Hence, Cecil entered wearing a mask of false compassion. When she looked at him with swollen eyes, the forlorn girl sprinted out of the room and up the stairs, closing her bedroom door with a thunderous bang.

‘What did you do?’ asked Cecil, slumping into the chair facing Albert’s.

‘Nothing.’ He cast a furious gaze at the old man and then at the floor as he said with stinging scorn. ‘However, the same cannot be said for you, uncle.’ Cecil looked away, inviting his nephew to comment further, ‘Your callous words, dear uncle.... They’ve hurt Edith more than anything I could have said to her.... She loathes you immeasurably....’

‘Enough.’ He shot daggers at Albert, then resumed in a mollifying tone. ‘Well, er... I’ll coax her into liking me again.’

Albert knitted his brow. 'Well, you'll wait until Raphael blows his trumpet.'

'It's not I who must resurrect her love, but you, dear boy.'

'I'm not sure I can... Sh-she acted strangely after seeing Templeton?'

'Strangely?'

'Edith was white and cold as marble. I tried comforting her.' Albert closed his eyes briefly, replaying the journey back to the townhouse like a scene in a play. 'Yet she moved her hand away each time I stroked it. Whatever feelings Edith has for me.' He paused, for a knot had gathered in his throat. 'They've changed.'

'That is to be expected,' said the old man in a murmur.

'How long can we keep up this charade?'

'Charade?' asked Cecil, tilting his head quizzically.

'Sims hasn't been paid. He's beginning to suspect our lack of money, Uncle Cecil.'

‘More reason for you to succeed with Edith. I’m certain she’ll change her mind in a day or two.’

‘I wish I had your self-confidence,’ said Albert, gesturing at the ghostly impressions on the sage green walls. ‘It’s only a matter of time before there’s nothing else to sell.’

Edith’s mood seemed to improve a week after the funeral, and she was more affable to Albert, who happily shared a moment with her on the divan in the sunny drawing-room. As Albert chatted interminably about this and that, the girl nodded in agreement; however, her mind was like the cogs in a machine, repeating the same question. *For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?* This pertinent theological question weighed on Edith, whose desire for gold caused

her to sacrifice her soul to Albert, where she pretended to laugh at Albert's fatuous jokes to hoodwink him. Ignorant of such deception, Albert was emboldened to brush his hand against hers, who permitted his gentle touch, imagining that it was Reuven's. The girl ached for the Hasidic youth whose brown eyes had the power to tame the snowstorm that was her melancholy. For in the magic mirror, she and Reuven were like snakes coiling in a passionate embrace around each other, their intensity regenerating the universe. A smile spread across her mouth, fading once she realised this was an unattainable dream.

Noticing this sudden change, Albert asked, 'Are you alright, Edith?'

She nodded, dispelling his concern. For an awkward minute or two, they were silent. Yet in her mind, Edith screamed, lamenting her fate as a woman to marry Albert, for whom she did not care.

Clenching her fist into a ball, she asked with a cracked voice, 'Do you want to marry me?'

‘Yes,’ said the young man, raising her other hand to his lips. ‘If you desire it, too?’

She nodded, inviting Albert to sample her plump lips. Once more, Edith inwardly screamed while gazing at the windows from which she fantasised Reuven staring back at her with his brown eyes fringed with long lashes. ‘We should wait for Reuven’s return.’ She stopped, returning her gaze to Albert, whose face was a blushing rose. ‘When will he be released from the hospital?’ He hesitated, prompting Edith to guess. ‘You don’t know.’

‘I’ll talk with Dr Drysdale.’ A weak smile formed on his lips. ‘He’ll let me know when Reuven’s well.’

‘I should go too.’

‘No! That hospital is no place for an impressionable woman.’

‘What type of hospital is it?’ He looked away. ‘Answer me, Albert!’

‘A lunatic asylum.’

‘That’s preposterous.’ Edith jumped up from the divan. ‘Reuven isn’t crazy.’

‘Haven’t you forgotten his behaviour on the train?’ She shook her head. ‘He was hysterical.’

‘Well, er... yes. The way the world is now.... violence breaking out everywhere,’ said Edith with a sigh, clutching her throat as she commiserated, ‘One can’t blame Reuven for acting out of line.’ Albert shook his head, inviting the girl to comment further, ‘I care for you as I do with him. Please take me to see Reuven.’ She dropped onto the divan, clasping his hands. ‘Perhaps I’ll be of some good to him.’ She stopped. ‘You want that, don’t you?’

‘Well, er.... yes.’ She planted a kiss on his cheek. ‘I’ll see the doctor first to get his opinion.’

Edith pushed him away. ‘Prove your love by allowing me to go straightaway.’ She walked to the door, where she lingered, awaiting his answer, and when this was not forthcoming, she said petulantly, ‘Reuven is as much my friend as yours.’

‘This isn’t a competition, Edith.’ He noticed her nostrils flaring. ‘Stop behaving as though it is.’

Edith exited the room in a huff once he had delivered the stinging rebuke.

‘I can’t escape the memory of you, Albert,’ sobbed Reuven, standing on the windowsill, readying to despatch himself. ‘Nor can I escape the memory of a lost era which once brought joy.’

Yet the age he reminisced about was purely an invention, for it was never an auspicious time for the young Reuven. Even now, the middle-aged man held fast to this delusion as he stood trembling on the windowsill, watching the approach of storm clouds with tearful eyes. The stillness surrendered to the rumble of thunder, and in a matter of minutes, the winds intensified to a gust, swirling dead leaves in a waltz around the courtyard. Lightning struck the crumbling cathedral tower, and a smile spread across his face, for it was there that he and Edith had once heard Mozart. Again, Reuven viewed that past incident through the prism of fantasy, for the sublime music had caused a shudder of fear to flow through his body. Besides, it did not matter what one’s faith was

anymore because the *Cleansing Wars* had destroyed all the world's religions ten years ago.

The faint tap of raindrops struck the roofs. In the darkening sunlight, the drizzle appeared to Reuven as red as the blood of countless billions lost to industrial warfare. All that was once beautiful (art, music, and books) was hacked into pieces, tossed onto an ever-growing pile, and set alight as an offering to the new gods of ignorance and hatred.

Oh, how Reuven ached for the welcoming embrace of his formative years and the time spent with the living Apollo, whose golden locks he wanted to bury his face in and inhale its heavenly scent. However, he knew Albert's aroma had been corrupted with the rancidity of death. Reuven slumped onto the windowsill with his legs dangling over its edge as the cloud's tears pelted the roof. Lightning flashed on and off like Morse code, transmitting a message from the other side that the dishevelled man, try as he might, could not decipher.

‘I was a fool to love you,’ said the middle-aged man, beating his hands on the window’s jagged frame, unaware that blood streamed, staining the wood a deep crimson.

Then he heard Albert’s phantom voice say, ‘It’s not your time yet.’

‘You’re dead, Albert.’ He paused. ‘So, too, the world of the past.’ He buried his face with his bloody hands. ‘I’ve nothing left to live for.’

‘But you do, Reuven.’

‘I can’t endure your absence any longer,’ said the dishevelled man, preparing to launch himself into the deep abyss that was death.

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Later the following day, Albert informed his uncle of the marriage, generating a cackle from the older man, who unsurprisingly remarked, ‘I told you so.’ Shamefaced, the young man glanced at the floor, daring not to look at Cecil.

‘Edith’s as malleable as clay.’ He hesitated. ‘Making her the ideal wife.’ He noticed a groundswell of displeasure radiating from the corners of his nephew’s mouth. ‘Why so glum, Albert?’

‘What we’re doing is wrong.’ He glanced at Cecil, then returned his gaze to the floor. ‘She’ll never love me.’ An iron chain coiled around his throat, squeezing out his words. ‘Nor shall I love her.’

‘This isn’t the time to develop scruples,’ said Uncle Cecil, striking the younger man, who flinched in surprise. ‘You’ll not ruin my plans.’ Again, he struck Albert, whose face wrinkled in pain. ‘When I’ve worked hard to bring it about.’ He hesitated. ‘Hasn’t Edith requested you to inquire about your friend?’ Cecil looked upwards, trying to recall the mysterious man’s identity. ‘What’s his name?’

‘Reuven.’

‘Well, you better do what she asks.’ He paused, then resumed with a warning, ‘Otherwise, you’ll never hear the end of it from her.’ Albert nodded. ‘By the way, where is she?’ Albert gestured upwards. ‘That girl spends too much

time in her bedroom.’ Cecil half-smiled and then gestured at the door. ‘You had better go, Albert.’

The young man walked out of the drawing-room, only to find Sims standing at the front door as always, staring in shock at Albert, whose face was branded by a reddening bruise.

‘What a shiner you’ve got.’ The driver pointed at Albert’s swollen cheek. ‘That’s going to hurt.’

‘Shut up, Sims,’ said Albert, baring his teeth slightly. ‘I don’t pay you for your snide comments.’

‘Well, you don’t, but your uncle does,’ quipped the fat driver, which triggered a frown on the young man. ‘When am I going to be paid?’

‘Well, er... I told Uncle Cecil.’ Albert emitted a nervous laugh. ‘He said it won’t be too long.’

‘Don’t take me for a fool. Your uncle has been avoiding me like the plague recently.’ He dug his finger into Albert’s chest. ‘I’ve seen enough to realise you’re short of money.’

‘That’s a lie, Sims.’ The driver folded his arms in disbelief. ‘After my marriage, you’ll be more than compensated.’

Sims looked at the staircase which led to Edith’s room. ‘I should talk to your fiancée.’ He pushed Albert aside and then walked to the stairs. ‘She’ll be eager to pay for what I know.’

‘No, don’t get her started,’ said Albert, yanking the fat driver back. ‘If you want to be rewarded, drive me to Bethlehem Hospital.’

Sims looked at him strangely, well aware Bethlehem was no ordinary hospital. The ginger sideburns driver wondered why Albert wanted to go to that *place*, a cesspool for the insane. Notwithstanding, Sims wanted to know and was about to inquire; however, Albert clapped his hands, further fuelling the driver’s curiosity. ‘Chop-Chop. Get the motor ready.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Sims, but before he exited the front door, he continued in a menacing tone, ‘Don’t forget my overdue wages. Otherwise, there’ll be hell to pay.’

Henceforth, Albert would have to tread carefully around the dullard driver, whom he believed would be controlled with the lure of Edith's gold cornucopia. But if his marriage to the girl ever foundered on the rock of dissolution, the driver would hound him and Cecil to Timbuktu, not hesitating to extract a pound of flesh from their hides. A girdle of fear encircled Albert's chest, tightening its hold, and causing him to gasp for air. He struggled momentarily, grasping the stair railing until he steadied himself and could breathe again.

Then Albert walked out of the townhouse, dazzled by the sunlight, and met Sims' scornful stare with indifference, further infuriating the driver, who jerked the vehicle's door open as the young man climbed inside. Without speaking a word, for his aggressive actions spoke volumes, Sims slammed it shut, took his place at the steering wheel, and shoved his foot on the accelerator. The motor tore down the cobblestone street, pushing Albert forcefully back in the leather seat.

'Slow down, Sims,' said Albert in a trembling voice.

The driver glared at him in the dash mirror, noting Albert floundering about, trying to grab hold of the armrest for dear life. Satisfied that he had stimulated distress in the young man, Sims lifted his foot off the accelerator. Instead of berating the impudent driver, Albert unusually kept his mouth shut, as he did not want to provoke Sims to speed up the motor again.

Albert's attention drifted from the driver onto the streets where he saw, from the safety of the vehicle, boarded-up shopfronts emblazoned in red graffiti heralding the end of plutocracy. Further along, a charred omnibus (smeared in blood) lying overturned beside a group of men hauling ashen bodies onto a wagon. The odour of singed flesh slapped Albert's senses, causing him to cover his nose with a handkerchief. The world (as it appeared to Albert) was aflame with revolutionary fervour, where the lower class were no longer content to follow the rules imposed by the elite.

Never had it been more critical to Albert to possess money than now, for it would enable him and Reuven to

escape the woes befalling Britannia. What the young man could not have imagined—the value of money—would lose its lustre in the coming years, becoming a worthless token once issued by the powerful to oppress the multitudes into financial bondage. Similarly, monetary servitude tightened its grip when Albert agreed to wed Edith, heightening his hatred of the girl for whom he had to sacrifice Reuven’s love.

Without warning, the thought of losing the Hasidic⁹ youth ricocheted like a projectile in Albert’s imagination, where it splintered into a myriad of outcomes. To his horror, Albert envisioned Reuven as an ashen shell stacked on the victims of the omnibus that he had the misfortune to witness earlier. In another example, Reuven was tangled in barbwire, trying to break free when a sniper’s bullet split his head apart like a ripe tomato. In these envisaged realities, the Keres¹⁰ would swoop down onto the battlefield, sinking their teeth and claws into Reuven’s

⁹ Of or relating to Hasidism, a Jewish sect founded in Poland in the 18th century.

¹⁰ In ancient Greek mythology, Keres were female death-spirits who personified violent death and who were drawn to bloody deaths on battlefields.

flesh, feasting on his blood. Then, these female death spirits merged into a single entity whose ugliness turned into divine perfection. With a kiss, the entity severed the silver cord, which bound Reuven's soul to his body, allowing it to descend into the mustard-coloured skies, where the entity and Reuven, through the act of sex, merged into one being.

Flushed with desire, Albert wanted to sample Reuven's Semitic snake. Yet the longer this was postponed, the more poisoned with wrath Albert would become, where the prospect of losing Reuven to another man or, worse, a woman, was akin to death. And as the motor drew closer to Bethlehem Hospital, Albert internally recited, *O beware, my lord, of jealousy; it is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on.* Shakespeare's words were never more pertinent to Albert than that day, for his mind was consumed with envy, competing against the green-eyed monster, which mocked him at every turn. 'Reuven is as much my friend as yours.' The beast emerged from the netherworld of Albert's

subconscious. Instead of being repulsive (as one would expect a monster to be), it was the embodiment of Edith, who continued to taunt, 'Reuven is as much my friend as yours.'

'No, he isn't,' said Albert, prompting the driver to slow the vehicle to a halt. 'Why are we stopping?'

The driver gestured at the monolith of grey stone that was the façade of the austere hospital.

'Oh, I see,' said Albert, looking around in surprise.

He flung the door open once the motor was parked beside a looming privet hedge and then leapt onto the gravel driveway. 'Wait here. I shan't be too long, Sims.'

The fat driver's gaze followed the retreating Albert until the young man had entered the building. Inside the whitewashed hall, Albert smelt the overpowering disinfectant stench that masked the urine odour and saw a heavyset orderly approaching.

'Who are you?' asked the man in an authoritative voice.

'Albert Sinclair.'

‘Why are you here?’

‘To see Dr Drysdale concerning my friend.’ While the orderly looked on with a narrowing stare, Albert said in a nervous tweet, ‘He’s a patient here.’

The man sighed contemptuously, gesturing to Albert to follow him. They walked down a dark passage; ahead was an iron-barred door. He withdrew a set of keys from his pocket and then unlocked the door, saying, ‘Wait at the nurses’ station.’ He pointed at a long counter enclosed in a grilled mesh, from which sat a white-haired woman. ‘I’ll fetch the doctor as he’s making the rounds now.’

Forthwith, the man scurried off like a crab in search of his leader, leading Albert under the watchful stare of the white-haired nurse. He smiled with trembling lips at the woman, who mirrored his gesture before resuming her work. Like the souls in purgatory, the patients also existed in the in-between state of lucidity and madness, where Albert could not help but flinch in surprise each time they moaned. The mood was a heavy weight on Albert’s chest, squeezing the life out of him. To save himself, he undid the

top button of his shirt before taking lungfuls of air. Approaching footsteps echoed in the capacious chamber, followed by the voice of Drysdale, saying, 'Please, Mr Sinclair, come into my office.'

The doctor guided Albert into an examination room, closing the door with a gentle yank behind them.

'Take a seat, Mr Sinclair,' said the doctor, pointing at the *chaise longue* on which Reuven had previously laid.

Instead of reclining, as was the therapeutic function of the *chaise longue*, Albert sat bolt upright (with arms folded) on its edge. Under the glow of an electric bulb, Drysdale clearly saw the fading bruise upon Albert's face. But rather than point this out, the doctor remained tight-lipped, preferring to note it in his journal. With pad and pencil in hand, the doctor sat in a chair opposite Albert, who awaited Drysdale's response, which, at first, came in a trickle before becoming a torrent of questions.

'Has Reuven been involved with anyone?'

Albert rubbed his chin, trying to decipher Drysdale's cryptic question. 'Involved?'

‘I shan’t beat around the bush, Mr Sinclair.’ He hesitated. ‘Has Reuven been intimate with anyone?’

‘Certainly not with me, Dr Drysdale... I would have reported him to the police if that had happened.’ Albert rubbed his face with his hands. ‘I don’t believe he’d stoop so low.’

‘How can you be certain, Mr Sinclair?’

‘Reuven’s too studious.’ His legs were a tense coil, preparing to discharge their nervous energy. ‘Too shy to entertain deviant desires.’ Albert leapt from the upholstered chair. ‘Why are you blackening my friend’s reputation, doctor?’

‘Please sit down, Mr Sinclair,’ said Drysdale, pointing at the chair. ‘I know my words have offended you.’ Once Albert resumed his seat, the doctor said in a faint voice, ‘You needn’t cover for Reuven anymore.’ Dumbfounded, Albert was about to speak when Drysdale interrupted him. ‘He confessed to being a homosexual.’

‘Never in a million years would I have believed Reuven to be a degenerate,’ said Albert with a curled upper

lip before he sighed. ‘I shall inform my fiancée, Edith.’ He hesitated, then emitted a nervous laugh. ‘Her concern for Reuven is why I came here.’

‘Aren’t you concerned about him as well?’

Again, Albert leapt from the chair. ‘Certainly not, doctor.’ He looked with narrowing eyes at Drysdale. ‘One cannot sympathise with a diseased creature.’

‘Isn’t that opinion too harsh?’

‘Well, er... no.’ He touched his heart. ‘Reuven betrayed my friendship, twisting it to satisfy his perversion.’

‘You’re being melodramatic, Mr Sinclair,’ said Drysdale with a snicker.

Albert touched his heart again. ‘Me? Melodramatic?’

‘You’re failing to deflect attention away from yourself.’

‘To hell with your claptrap,’ said Albert in an explosive voice.

‘A moment ago, you said Reuven was “too shy to entertain deviant desires”.’

Albert loomed over the doctor, shifting his weight from foot to foot. ‘What are you getting at?’

‘It suggests you tried to seduce Reuven.’ Albert looked away, prompting the doctor to continue his psychiatric analysis. ‘Your over-the-top condemnation of Reuven’s homosexuality confirms your own.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Albert, clenching his hand into a ball.

‘Nonsense it may be.’ The doctor jotted something on his pad. ‘However, my experience as a psychiatrist proves otherwise.’ Albert walked to the door, his hand hovered above the knob. ‘For your sake, Mr Sinclair, don’t go down the same path as Reuven.’

‘Thank you, Dr Drysdale, for alerting me of the danger.’ Albert twisted the knob and stormed out of the room.

After returning from the hospital, Albert gently knocked on Edith's bedroom door. The wooden barrier slowly opened, revealing the girl's solemn face. When Edith saw him, her eyes widened in alarm. The girl gestured at his declining discolouration, prompting Albert to say reassuringly, 'I wasn't watching where I was going.' He hesitated, then released an anxious chuckle. 'Tomorrow, it will have completely healed.'

A half-smile formed as she said, 'That's good to hear.' She stopped, then looked around to ensure no one was overhearing their conversation. 'Did you see the doctor? Did he say how Reuven is?'

'You needn't worry about Reuven.'

'I'm sick with worry.' She hauled him into the bedroom, then closed the door with a quiet tug. 'Tell me everything.' His lips were welded shut, triggering Edith to

conclude that something dire had happened. 'Is Reuven's condition deteriorating?'

'As my future wife, you care more about him than you do me,' said Albert with a knitted brow.

'I value Reuven as a friend...' Albert looked away. 'As you, yourself, once did.' He returned her gaze with a smouldering stare. 'I don't understand your cavalier nature towards him.' Sorrow surged from her trembling lips. 'It verges on cruelty.'

Her accusation had eviscerated Albert, causing him to lament inwardly, *That's uncalled for.... Edith knows nothing about cruelty... Unlike me, she's not renouncing a lover because of societal prejudices.*

'Albert,' said the girl, trying to gain his attention.

He looked at her with vacant eyes. 'What?'

'We can postpone the wedding.' She stopped, noticing relief wash over his countenance. 'Or annul it if you think that's better.' He was silent. 'Say the word Albert... I'll abide by your decision.'

In that instant, Edith had set him free; however, the lure of money was too enticing, so Albert swept the shards of disillusionment from his lips. ‘For, as Shakespeare said: All the world’s a stage and all the men and women merely players.’ He drew her close, kissing her colourless cheek. ‘However, one thing is true: societal convention condemns us to play the role of husband and wife regardless of whether it makes us happy.’ Albert released his grip and staggered to the door, turning the handle as he said, ‘We can’t back out now. There’s too much at stake.’

He exited the room, leaving Edith to ruminate on his words. Muffled sobs reverberated from her room. Albert stood at the stairhead listening, his heart hardening with Edith’s every moan. A perverted smile spread across his face as he walked jubilantly down the stairs.

Months earlier, in the slums of Londinium, the harbingers of death (sewer rats) multiplied, spreading their corruption to every nook and cranny of the dilapidated dwellings that housed the poor. As the days transitioned into weeks, the unfortunate residents developed fevers, followed by their fingers and noses turning black with gangrene, after which they were cut down like withered grass by the Grim Reaper's scythe. This was no surprise for the destitute, who, unlike their wealthy landlords, were more acquainted with death because the Grim Reaper lurked in the background of the overcrowded tenements, swinging its scythe whenever disease broke out. Regardless, the poor, tears streaking their grimy faces, watched dead family and friends piled on each other, then burnt on enormous bonfires, tainting the sky with black, murky stripes.

Fearful the outbreak would spread further, the government sealed off the slums with barbwire barricades, preventing the inhabitants from leaving. Men wearing gas masks and white protective clothing fumigated the tenements, causing the buildings to reek of rotten eggs. More and more people died, fanning the flames of resentment towards the government and the privileged few who squeezed them with further rent increases. With nothing to lose, they sharpened their knives, preparing for a fight. Violence erupted. Wave upon wave of the destitute masses breached the barricades, cutting through the police line like butter, spreading the plague to more suburbs.

News of the epidemic did not reach the elite's magnificent mansions; however, the King's Government issued alerts to the police and health authorities, of which Drysdale was a member. The psychiatrist was gripped by a false sense of security because Bethlehem Hospital (although relatively close to the outbreak) was a self-contained institution that rarely received visitors, except for Albert's the other day. Besides, Drysdale was focused

on curing Reuven, who, by this stage, was becoming more malleable to the hypnotic treatment.

In the dimly lit examination room, the doctor used a candle's flame to hypnotise Reuven, who was lying on the *chaise longue*. 'As you listen to my voice, let my words wash over you.' He paused. 'On the facing wall, you see a portrait of a young lady. She has auburn hair and sapphire eyes. Isn't she beautiful, Reuven?' The patient slowly nodded. 'Do you remember her name?'

'Yes, it's Edith.'

'Does she ignite your passion?'

'Yes,' said Reuven with a tremor of hesitation.

Drysdale smiled, for the hypnotic treatment was progressing well. Hence, he continued to implant more suggestions in Reuven's receptive subconsciousness, purging, what the psychiatrist believed to be deviant desires. Yet again, Drysdale was lulled into a false sense of security concerning his patient, Reuven. Because the doctor did not know that hypnotism is ineffectual at changing someone's sexual preference.

Drysdale ended the session by saying in a soothing voice, ‘At the count of five, you’ll be wide awake.’

Slowly, the shutters of slumber rose from Reuven’s eyes with each number the doctor uttered, followed by the patient taking a deep yawn as he stretched on the *chaise longue*.

‘I’m no longer afraid, doctor.’ He sat bolt upright with a broadening grin. ‘Nor is my mind at war with itself.’

‘Excellent.’

‘Next month, will I be well to attend university?’

‘Perhaps.’ Drysdale extinguished the candle, causing the room to darken considerably. The psychiatrist walked to the light switch, and with a downward flick, the electric bulb turned on, flooding the room with a golden tint. ‘The mind is a fragile organ. We must heal it accordingly. For that reason, we mustn’t rush your treatment.’ He rubbed his chin. ‘Someone could bring your university books to the hospital.’ He gestured at the desk. ‘You can study here.’

‘Well, I guess that’ll have to do.’

‘Whom do you have in mind to fetch the books?’

‘Albert Sinclair.’

‘Anyone else?’

‘Why not him?’

Apprehension radiated from his face when Drysdale said, ‘Mr Sinclair is unsuitable.’ He paused, then scratched his chin. ‘When you were unwell on the train, who was the young woman?’ Awkwardness coloured Reuven’s cheeks, prompting the psychiatrist to say thoughtfully, ‘She took a great interest in your well-being.’

‘Edith Andley.’

Ah, that’s why he said her name under hypnosis, thought Drysdale, whose gaze drifted from Reuven to a fly buzzing around the electric bulb. As the insect drew close, the doctor crushed it with his hands and wiped its squashed body on his handkerchief.

‘Where can I reach her, Reuven?’

‘She’s staying with Albert.’ The patient paused. ‘I don’t know the address.’

‘I’ll fetch the telephone directory from the nurses’ station.’ He walked to the door, gesturing at Reuven as he said, ‘Stay here.’ Drysdale exited the room, returning several minutes later with a slender volume, where he leafed through its contents and saw Cecil Sinclair 152 Cavendish Street Tel. Londinium 6103 in small print. ‘That’s the only Sinclair in the directory,’ said the psychiatrist with a grin.

Reuven gazed at the floor, daring not to look at Drysdale. ‘Please don’t telephone them yet.’

‘The sooner I call, the quicker you’ll recover.’ Drysdale looked at him with an arched brow. ‘You want that, don’t you?’ The patient was silent. ‘Answer me, Reuven.’

‘Well, er... yes. I’m afraid.’ He hesitated. ‘Afraid of the outcome.’

‘You needn’t be,’ said Drysdale with sincerity, walking to the door where he added, ‘Wait here while I telephone them.’

‘Yes, Dr Drysdale, I’ll inform Edith when she awakens. Goodbye, doctor,’ said Cecil, putting the telephone receiver down. Footsteps reverberated like muffled thunder down the vista, causing him to spin around. ‘Is that you, Albert?’

‘Yes, uncle.’ The mature man’s stony stare startled him. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘Come into the drawing-room,’ said Cecil. As they passed into the sage green room, whose walls were littered with more shadowy outlines, the old man closed the door behind them and said, ‘You never told me Reuven is insane.’

‘He’s no longer my friend, uncle.’

‘That may be the case for you; however, that’s not so with Edith.’ He collapsed onto the divan, patting it with his

hand. ‘Come, sit.’ Albert edged closer. ‘Drysdale wants her to come to that infernal hospital.’

Albert slumped beside his uncle. ‘Why?’

‘He didn’t say.’ Albert’s face diminished in its radiant hue, prompting the elderly man to comment, ‘However, the doctor’s voice hinted the girl may help Reuven.’

‘That’s preposterous, uncle.’ Albert leapt from the divan as if it were a stove’s hotplate. ‘I’m a greater benefit to him than her.’

‘Didn’t you say that Reuven’s no longer your friend?’

‘Well, er... yes.’

‘In that case, you needn’t worry about him.’ Cecil pulled him back down. ‘Instead, dear nephew, make sure Edith is happy.’ Raised fissures stretched across Albert’s brow, triggering the senior man to ask with concern. ‘Where is she?’ The young man gestured upwards. ‘That girl spends too much time in her bedroom. It’s a sign...’

‘Of what?’

‘Melancholia.’

‘Uncle, I’m miserable too.’

‘I don’t care if you are.’ He raised his hand, preparing to strike the younger man. ‘You’ll feel my slap if you can’t wed Edith.’ He pushed Albert away. ‘Go to her.’

Albert, demoralised by his uncle’s mistreatment, staggered like a condemned prisoner up the stairs. He loitered at the stairhead, clenching the banister so forcefully that his hand whitened. With a deep inhalation, Albert let go, causing pins and needles to rocket up his hand, reminding him he was subject to pain and pleasure.

‘Edith, open the door,’ said Albert, gently knocking on the wooden portal. ‘I’ve wonderful news about Reuven.’

Her footsteps padded to the door, followed by the metallic clang of the lock being unbolted and the door creaking open.

‘Come inside,’ said Edith, seizing Albert’s hand and directing him with a gentle tug into the room, after which she bolted the door. ‘Is Reuven well enough to be released?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’ Edith frowned in disappointment, prompting Albert to say, ‘Dr Drysdale has requested your presence at the hospital.’ Relief radiated from her face, followed by a widening smile. ‘To help in Reuven’s recovery.’

‘I’ll go at once,’ said Edith with climbing concern.

‘No, no, it’s too late for that. Tomorrow morning is better... When fewer people are on the streets.... When there’s less likely to be an incident.’

‘I’m not afraid,’ said the girl, rolling her eyes in disbelief.

The colour drained from his face. ‘After what I saw the other day, you should be Edith.’ He gasped. ‘The world’s degenerating into anarchy.’ He touched his neck. ‘The sooner we’re married.’ As Albert said in a nervous tweet, images of burnt bodies haunted him, ‘The sooner we can escape this madness. If we fail.’ He gasped. ‘I shudder to think of the consequences for you and me.’

‘What about Reuven’s?’

‘Well, er... yes, Edith. Apart from you, he’s foremost on my mind,’ said Albert with reddening cheeks. He grabbed her hand, pushing her out of the room. ‘Come, have something to eat.’

The girl uncoupled her hand from his. ‘No, I’m not hungry.’

‘You live on air, Edith.’

‘When will the motor be ready tomorrow?’ asked Edith, whose mind, like an abacus, computed the remaining time.

‘Ah, after breakfast.’ He hesitated. ‘You’re not going alone.’ Albert noticed the flicker of resentment in her eyes, prompting him to say soothingly, ‘I value your safety, Edith.’ As the girl fingered her embroidered sleeve, her antipathy faded into acquiescence. ‘You understand why I must accompany you?’ She nodded, triggering the young man as he exited the room to say, ‘I’ll awaken you tomorrow morning.’

She shut the door, collapsing like a bag of coal. With each passing day, Edith could feel the chains of nuptial

servitude twist tighter around her throat; if she did nothing, her spirit would die, and she would transform into someone she did not want to become—a weak-willed woman—incapable of thinking for herself. *I'd rather kill myself than face that*, thought the girl, rising from her haunches then staggering to the bed where she lay outstretched on the soft mattress. *A young husband, even one as healthy as Albert, could die and set me free*, mused Edith, whose heart quickened with the prospect of outliving her future spouse.

Although Albert's death was improbable, she folded her hands together, imploring God to grant her prayer. To her surprise, the universe responded: as she lay praying, thunder reverberated, followed by the silver flash of lightning and rain pelting against her bedroom's windows. At first, Edith attributed it as purely coincidental, but the more unsettling the storm became, the more convinced she became God had heard her. Whether He will grant it, she did not know. Regardless, the shutters of sleep did not descend on the unfortunate girl, who winced every time the lightning cracked. Hour after hour, the storm raged over

the city as if the cosmos were at war with itself. To her relief, the tempest moved out to sea, revealing (through the half-closed bedroom windows) the delicate light of distant stars and the crescent moon, allowing Edith to drift off to sleep.

As the motor meandered down the maze of streets, some of which were fringed in high, razor-sharp fencing, the vehicle's occupants sensed something was awry, evident in the strong smell of sulphur and people covered with black spots coalescing with outstretched hands behind the barbed wire barricades. Affected by their suffering, Edith shielded her eyes until the motor had transported them further along the street. In contrast, Albert's face was a blank slate, barely expressing sympathy for the unfortunate people.

‘Death often visits them,’ said the young man cavalierly. Rather than censure his callousness, she pressed her lips together, inviting Albert to make another snide remark, ‘One mustn’t feel sorry for them, Edith...’ She rolled her eyes. ‘They’re replaceable cogs in the machinery of capitalism.’ Her face was as flushed as a terracotta pot. ‘Ah, my words have struck a nerve.’ He hesitated. ‘You’ll agree when the gutter rats rob us.’ Edith retreated to the other side of the motor. ‘It’s for that reason we must push them back into their warren.’

You’re unbelievable, thought the young woman, focusing her critical gaze on the intractable Albert, whose sneering smirk further infuriated her. Disgusted, she looked away, resuming her inward dialogue. *Never has he stooped so low as now. I’m vindicated for wishing him dead.*

Like a discharging projectile, the motor rocketed to its destination, the grey monolith that was the hospital. Edith bit her lip, running her fingers along the door’s edge, hoping she would be granted the opportunity to see

Reuven. The forlorn girl yearned for the Hasidic man, whose brown, soulful eyes ignited primitive passions. Edith was unaware that those same primitive passions (ignited by Reuven) also surged through Albert, whose hand stroked her shoulder, triggering her to wince in surprise and look at him with dull eyes.

Albert gestured at the massive stone building. ‘We’ve arrived, Edith.’

The metallic beast shuddered to a halt beside the privet hedge, but before Sims had left his seat to open the door for Edith, she leapt out and gestured at both men. ‘Wait, here.’

When the girl disappeared into the dour dwelling, Sims emitted a light laugh, for he was aware of the smouldering tension between Albert and Edith, but, at this stage, had not cottoned on to its cause, the pair’s love for the insane inmate of Bethlehem Hospital, Reuven.

‘Stop your snickering,’ said Albert in a booming voice, which did not affect the fat driver, whose laugh became more audible—more defiant. For the first time,

Albert realised his control over others (evident in Sims' refusal to stop laughing) was waning, for the young man's world was predicated on exercising power, and the prospect of losing it terrified him.

Meanwhile, Edith was ushered by the same heavy-set orderly that had previously shown Albert into the dank hospital ward. Rather than displaying derision as with Albert, the stocky man was overtly cordial to Edith, whose chest tightened with worry. When she was not looking, the horrid man surveyed her supple body, noting with rapture its curvaceousness. Affected by her beauty, the orderly, whose voice was lustful, said, 'Stay.' He licked his lips. 'I'll fetch the doctor.'

She let out a breath she did not realise she was holding, for his presence had disgusted her. While Edith

waited in the whitewashed corridor, she saw a white-haired nurse look up from behind the grilled nurses' station (scrutinising the girl) before dropping back down. Then footsteps approached from the other side of the room, causing Edith to turn, where she saw Drysdale emerge from the gloom.

‘Come into the examination room,’ said the doctor reassuringly. Once inside, Drysdale closed the door, gesturing at the *chaise longue*. ‘Please take a seat, Miss Andley.’ Edith sat on its cushioned edge, playing with her embroidered collar, nervously awaiting Drysdale’s response. However, once the psychiatrist (with pencil and pad in hand) slumped onto his chair, he said, ‘You needn’t be afraid.’ She smiled, prompting him to ask, ‘Do you wish to be of service to Reuven?’ She nodded. ‘Excellent. He’s lucky to have you as a friend.’

Flushed, she lowered her head. ‘I sometimes don’t feel like he does.’ She stopped, trying to hold back her tears.

Drysdale jotted this down. ‘You love him?’

‘Yes.’ She looked up, tears tumbling down the smooth expanse of white skin, then looked down again. ‘Ever since I encountered Reuven on the train to Cantabrigia.’

‘Why, dear child, are you marrying Albert Sinclair?’

‘Well... I don’t have a choice.’

‘Nonsense, young lady. One always has a choice.’

‘No, I don’t. If I did, I’d decouple myself from Albert.’ She stopped. ‘And pursue Reuven instead.’ Drysdale jotted something down, prompting the girl to comment further, ‘Don’t judge my actions as irrational. As a woman, I’ve learnt to compromise repeatedly. I did that with my late Mama.’ She stopped to spit out the stone of sorrow. ‘Now I must do the same with Albert.’

‘You needn’t with him.’ Drysdale wrote something down and then said with a warning, ‘For, unlike Reuven, he’s unworthy of it.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘He’s heading down the wrong path that’ll lead to his destruction. Reuven is in danger of following him.’ He

hesitated, noting the physical effects (flaring nostrils and dilated pupils) his words triggered in her. ‘With your love, not to mention help, you can direct Reuven to the correct path that’ll lead to his salvation.’ He bit the end of the pencil and then asked in a tantalising timbre, ‘Do you want that, Edith?’

‘With every fibre of my being, I do,’ said the young woman, gesturing at her heaving bosom.

‘But first, you must send Albert away.’

‘That’ll be difficult.’

‘No, not at all, Edith.’ While the doctor concocted a plan, he tapped the pencil against the chair’s armrest. ‘Reuven mentioned his university books were still in his dorm room.’ The pencil slipped from his hand, falling to the floor with a faint rattle. ‘Tell Albert to retrieve them. While he’s gone for the day, come here posthaste.’ Drysdale picked up the pencil and scribbled another note before closing his pad. ‘Your presence will benefit Reuven’s recovery.’ He rose from the chair, strolling towards the door. ‘You may leave now.’ The psychiatrist

waited for the approaching girl before pushing the wooden barrier open. ‘Ah, don’t forget his salvation depends on you, Edith.’

‘No, I won’t,’ said Edith, flowing like a fast-moving stream out of the room.

Once the iron-barred door was unbolted by the stocky orderly, whose leering gaze followed the retreating girl, a sense of relief enveloped Edith. This reprieve was short-lived, as the psychiatrist’s words haunted her with their religious fervour about safeguarding Reuven from the dreadful destiny that would occur to Albert. As Edith approached the sunlit lobby, she froze, hiding behind the bronze doorway where she watched Albert, wondering why Drysdale had so little regard for him. From this vantage point, she saw cigarette smoke gushing from Albert’s nostrils as he sat in the backseat with an indolent facial expression, which sometimes became animated by his heated conversation with the driver. She pricked up her ears, trying to decipher their talk; however, due to distance, she could not, so she emerged from behind the bronze

doorway and walked towards them. Her approaching footsteps alerted the men, evident in their hushed voices and narrowing stares.

‘We wondered what had become of you,’ said Albert with feigned concern, tossing his burning cigarette butt away. ‘Did everything go well with Dr Drysdale?’ He signalled to Sims to open the motor door for Edith, who was too busy to wait, and opened it instead. ‘Did he say when Reuven will be released?’ asked Albert, as she climbed into the vehicle.

She remained tight-lipped, prompting Albert to ask again. As the motor motioned forward, she looked him in the face, batting her long lashes and saying in a drawl, ‘I don’t know, Albert.’

‘What did Drysdale say?’

‘Well, um, he believes Reuven may benefit from continuing his university studies. As you and Reuven share a dorm room...’ Suspicion shot forth like a salvo of spears from Albert’s cobalt eyes, triggering a nervous laugh from the girl in a vain attempt to dodge them. Yet, try as she

might, they hit their target, causing her to wince in distress. 'You could fetch his books.... The next day, I'll deliver them to Reuven.'

'You needn't trouble yourself, Edith.' She was about to speak when Albert resumed disparagingly. 'As Reuven and I are auditing the same classes, I'll benefit him more than you. For that reason, I'll take the books to him instead.' He hesitated. 'Uncle Cecil has spoken to the college Dons about Reuven's situation, not to mention yours and mine.' He noticed her upper lip trembling. 'We're exempted from assignments and examinations for six months.'

'What happens after that?'

'We'll be married by then, so you needn't worry about university.'

'What?'

'It's unbecoming for a married woman to be seen on campus.'

She moved to the other side of the motor. 'Well, the same could be said of married men.'

‘You’d be too preoccupied as a wife and mother to care about university.’

When Albert uttered that dire prognosis, her hopes were pulverised to ash where the winds of resentment scattered them. Never would Edith have believed her life would sink into the monotony of domestic servitude where she would keep house and raise children for a husband incapable of empathy. She desired more, in particular Reuven’s undivided adoration. Nevertheless, Edith had no option but to sacrifice herself to the golden calf of capitalism. As the motor sped past a group of match-girls, Edith was reminded that without money, she would be condemned to hawk her wares (like those stick-thin girls) to passing pedestrians who would look away in disgust.

Without warning, her face transformed to the colour of slate. ‘I can’t breathe,’ said Edith, fumbling at her lace collar, undoing a few buttons, after which she could inhale deeply. Albert was unaffected, barely registering concern; however, she saw (in his cobalt eyes) a sadistic satisfaction in her struggle for air. Like a shot of adrenaline, hate

surged through her body, invigorating her with the warm flush of feminine fortitude. Rather than displaying such strength, Edith slumped against Albert, lulling him into believing she was as fragile as a porcelain doll that she would fracture at the merest hint of danger. Men of Albert's ilk, according to Edith's estimation, had the fatal flaw of being too asinine, too confident that things would always go to plan. What better way would she disrupt such schemes than by coaxing Reuven to flee to Ameryka?

‘What you said about a wife's place at university is correct,’ said Edith, lifting her head from his shoulder, but before he could utter a word, she asked, ‘Can you forgive my foolishness, Albert?’

Her request for clemency invited scepticism from Albert. To convince him otherwise, she showered him with kisses. In that lip-locked embrace, they closed their eyes, each imagining the other as Reuven, whose illusory presence scorched their souls with sensuality. However, Albert and Edith uncoupled from each other, aware that the

driver (saliva gathering at his mouth's edge) was watching them in the dash mirror.

Sensing the twosome's shame, Sims smiled, revealing his yellow-stained teeth, after which the stout driver further fuelled their discomfiture by uttering an off-the-cuff remark:

‘Oh, to be young... overflowing with romantic idealism...’ Sims paused, then sliced through their hypocrisy. ‘Only to realise in old age that it was built on a lie.’

His upper lip curled as Albert said, ‘I never took you for a philosopher, Sims.’

‘Well, there's a lot you don't know sir... Perhaps that's for the better. One thing is for sure, I know dishonesty when I see it. I know when someone's being taken advantage of.’

‘Pray elaborate?’ asked Edith with a flutter of fear.

Sims saw in the dash mirror his employer's eyes glaring at him. ‘Forget it, Miss.’

She sat in silence for the rest of the journey, speculating about what the driver was reluctant to say. Whatever it could be, he mirrored Albert's sombre stare.

As the sun sunk in the west, depriving Londinium of its luminous rays, Albert and Cecil retired to the drawing-room after Edith had gone to bed, allowing the men to speak freely; however, unbeknownst to them, Sims hovered outside, listening to their conversation. The young man dropped onto the divan, withdrew a cigarette from his breast pocket, and lit it before taking a deep drag. Although Cecil countenanced the late Mrs Andley smoking, in the case of his nephew, the senior man said:

‘Smoke outside Albert!’

Rather than acquiesce to his uncle's demands, Albert deliberately expelled the rich herbaceous, woody smoke at Cecil, who walked to the window and opened it, hoping the evening breeze would dilute the overpowering stench.

‘Your defiance is intolerable,’ said Cecil as he strolled back to the chair facing the divan. ‘If it weren’t for me meddling in the late Mrs Andley’s legal affairs.’ He sat down and then lowered his voice. ‘You, my boy, would be kicked to the curb.’

‘And so would you too, uncle,’ said Albert, who was no longer afraid of upsetting him.

Astonished by Albert’s audacity, the senior man had to handle him carefully because the finances, not to mention the reputation of the Sinclair family, rested with the impudent boy. For that reason, he probed Albert about his trip with Edith to the hospital. At the mention of Edith’s queer behaviour and Sims’ tactless taunt, dismay like a ripple on a lake spread across Cecil’s countenance, prompting the mature man to conjecture:

‘Sims has been snooping. Yesterday, I saw him in the library, rummaging through my desk. Perhaps, looking for this.’ Cecil pulled from his coat pocket Mrs Andley’s unaltered *Will & Testament*. ‘I keep it on my person.’

‘He suspects us, uncle.’

‘Well, it’s time to give old Sims the boot.’

‘Wait until after the marriage.’ Albert paused and took a drag on the cigarette before expelling the smoke from his nostrils like a fire-breathing dragon. ‘We’ll have the money to pay Sims off.’

‘Or an assassin to kill him,’ said Cecil with a sinister snicker. ‘Don’t you see? Our secrets will die with Sims.’

The cigarette fell from his mouth. ‘That’s going too far.’ Snuffing out the burning butt with the heel of his shoe, Albert said, ‘That’s a hanging offence.’

Sims slinked away, descending into the townhouse’s shadowy depths, for he had heard enough of their diabolical designs. Enraged by their treachery, he would gather evidence, including Mrs Andley’s unaltered Will, to sell to Edith or give to the police, whichever most benefited his survival. Yet the main sticking point was how Sims would steal the prized document without Cecil being alerted to its absence. As Sims entered his basement bedroom, darkness enfolded him, where he struck a match

to light a candle to illuminate the threadbare room. From nowhere, an epiphany exploded in the driver's mind, overwhelming him (like Moses before the burning bush) with awe at its simplicity. *Steal the Will when Cecil takes a bath at midnight.*

Even from the basement, he heard the hallway clock tolling eleven times, signalling him to wait before venturing upstairs again. Time slithered like a snail, further exacerbating the knot in his stomach, for he dreaded the consequences of being caught by Cecil. Notwithstanding, Sims saw the winds of change sweeping across society, leaving a world on the brink of revolution. *It's a matter of time before the powerless overthrow the powerful.* Despite that, the ginger sideburns driver would have to hold his tongue, never letting on that he knew about Sinclair's secrets.

Half an hour later, the boiler emitted a soft humming sound before changing its tone to a loud rumble. He guessed Cecil was drawing a hot bath from this noise. Sims removed his shoes, left the socks on, and tiptoed up the

stairs, looking from side to side before entering the hallway. He proceeded gingerly up the main stairwell that led to the building's upper levels. His heart throbbed in unison with the ticking clock, but froze when he heard the tread of approaching footsteps. Sims dashed behind an enormous Chinese vase. To his relief, a maid scurried out of Cecil's room, carrying a basket of soiled bed sheets. *She's made his bed.* The maid hurried past him, unaware he was watching her descend the stairs. Then the clock released twelve sonorous clangs, causing Sims to flinch in surprise. Once the sound had dissipated, he crept towards Cecil's bedroom, his hand hovering over the doorknob. With a gentle twist, Sims opened it and snuck inside.

From the adjoining bathroom, he heard the splash of water and Cecil singing a humorous ditty from *The Mikado*. The bedroom was filled with sweet, delicate violets, which seemed like water to gush underneath the bathroom door. However, Sims had no time to appreciate its fragrance, for his eyes scanned the room, looking for Cecil's clothes, in which he believed the legal document

was concealed. As luck would have it, he saw the muted-coloured garments lying like a stranded ship on the bed's diaphanous covers. Sims glided towards the bed, aware time was running out. He rifled through the pockets. His eyes brightened when he found the coveted document. Snatching it, Sims exited the room posthaste.

The following day, Albert took the train to Cantabrigia while Edith left the townhouse and hailed a taxi to the hospital, where she planned to meet Reuven. As the cab whizzed across *Londinium Bridge*, she could not help but wonder why Cecil had acted strangely at breakfast. The mature man lost his dominant demeanour, instead moving like a worn-out clock whose mechanism needed winding up. When the girl had pointed this out to the departing Albert, he simply said, 'Uncle Cecil had trouble sleeping last night.' Again, she probed him for

more information. 'I don't know.' Albert looked at the hallway clock. 'I'll miss the train.'

Notwithstanding, Edith's thoughts returned to the imminent reunion with Reuven, which she hoped would be a romantic prelude, leading to a fairytale finale. Her breath quickened as the taxi swept past the dreary streets like a comet's tail. Painted-faced harlots, whose cologne could not conceal their bestial stench, lined the road, whereas some others congregated outside a pub, ready to pounce like black widow spiders on the drunks that staggered outside. *Since life is a constant struggle for those unfortunate women, one can't help but pity their plight,* thought Edith as the vehicle whirled past.

Although Edith appeared to wear the corset of conformity, which compressed unconventionality from the feminine temperament, the girl dreamed that by reuniting with Reuven, she could unclasp its busk, allowing her to breathe the air of emancipation. Everything rested on today's visit. Whether Reuven would have a romantic relationship with Edith, even if it meant cuckolding her

future fiancé, Albert, to gain it. The closer the cab came to the hospital, the more evident the wreath of sweat that trickled down her temples. To the late Mrs Andley's annoyance, Edith was at risk of setting alight all the old woman had achieved on the bonfire of scandal. *Perhaps Edith's wild abandonment was a way of getting back at her domineering mother?*

Whatever the case, Edith had the opportunity (as the taxi raced up the hospital driveway) to tell the driver to turn back; instead, the malaise of ardour had rendered her mute, incapable of resisting Reuven. Upon arrival at the austere building's entrance, she paid the driver and swiftly navigated the maze-like corridors to reach the ward where Reuven was housed. After being admitted, Edith was escorted by the stocky orderly to a courtyard fringed by a high fence, where she found Reuven sitting on a bench surrounded by red roses. She studied him for a while, noting (with a gasp of ecstasy) the wind teasing apart his curly, black locks and how a ray of sunlight tinged those treasured tresses in gold. Yet this bucolic scene was

illusionary, a mere creation of a girl stricken with longing. Never could she fathom the dread of being imprisoned like the patient Reuven. Despite that, Edith entertained this fantasy by advancing towards the forlorn man.

‘How are you, Reuven?’

His eyes brightened the moment she sat down beside him. ‘I’m fine.... Now that you’ve visited me.’ The patient paused, then looked around to ensure no one was eavesdropping. ‘Each day is the same as the next.... Nothing eventful ever happens here.’ A smile slowly formed. ‘Did you bring my books?’

She shook her head. ‘Albert’s gone to Cantabrigia to fetch them.’

‘Has he spoken about me?’

‘No, Albert’s been too busy.’ She looked away for a moment. ‘Now that we’re getting married.’

‘Married? Since when?’

‘While you were hospitalised.’ The colour drained from his face, followed by a cascade of tears. ‘Please don’t cry, Reuven.’ Edith embraced him, and then she felt an

urge to kiss him. Hitherto, Reuven would have resisted, but the implanted mesmeric commands seemed successful as he kissed her back. ‘I shouldn’t have told you, Reuven. Anyway, I’m glad that I did. I don’t care a straw about Albert.’ His breathing was affected by adoration and abhorrence, quickening and slowing in equal measure, as these opposing feelings now revealed a man in conflict with himself. Reuven listened like a stone as the young woman prattled on, trying to hide his discomfort. ‘Although I’m forced to marry him... My heart belongs to you, Reuven... It always will.’

Once Edith was exhausted from speaking, Reuven rose from the hard bench and then said in a tone that suggested annoyance, ‘If you don’t mind, I wish to go to bed... The morning has been taxing.’

Edith got up from the bench, dusting off the dead rose petals stuck to her dress. Again, she kissed his lips, noting their unresponsiveness to her confusion.

‘If Albert were to visit.’ She looped her arm through his as they strolled into the ward. ‘Say nothing about what I told you.’

At that moment, Albert’s train shuddered to a halt at the Cantabrigia station. As Albert descended from the carriage, he calculated walking from the railway station to the campus would take another twenty minutes. While he walked along the university town’s narrow cobble streets, he saw the same signs heralding the end of the King’s Government as he had witnessed in Londinium plastered on shops’ windows. The town was quiet, devoid of students riding their bicycles to classes. The closer he got to the sandstone barriers that enclosed the campus, the more anarchistic graffiti he saw, triggering a ripple of unease. Without warning, the sound of discharging guns

swept past, followed by blood-curdling screams, then silence. A hand grabbed Albert by the scruff of the neck, dragging him inside a bookstore.

A man's voice whispered, 'The police have cordoned off Occidental University... Extremists have taken hostages... As you've heard, they've already shot some.'

'When did this happen?' asked Albert, turning around to face his anonymous rescuer whom he recognised at once as the bespectacled, auburn-haired tutor, Heathcliff Rochester.

'Half an hour ago.'

The tutor moved further into the dimly lit store, hiding amongst a bookcase of Eastern philosophical tomes. He gestured at Albert to come away from the window. An instant later, a far-off bomb exploded, causing the tempered glass to shatter into pebbles. Stricken with shock, Albert remained fixed on the floor as blood streamed down his face. Heathcliff hauled him to the back of the store, where he assessed the severity of Albert's injuries.

‘You’re lucky, only a few scratches,’ said the tutor with a faint smile.

‘Do you hear that?’ asked Albert in a nervous timbre.

The clip-clopping of horses grew louder, interspersed by the hefty stomp of boots. Heathcliff skulked to the blown-out window, where he saw Cavalry officers pulling a gun carriage and soldiers filing past, preparing for a battle.

‘Till the army has dealt with the radicals.’ Heathcliff hesitated, knowing full well that more people would die today. ‘We’d better stay here.’

‘Never would I have believed the unrest in Londinium would come here.’

‘Well, it’s happening everywhere,’ said Heathcliff, his eyes darting back and forth in nervous anticipation of violence. ‘Not even Cantabrigia was spared. At first, revolutionary pamphlets circulated among the workers, and then there was a spate of vandalism.’ He buried his face in his hands. ‘Now violence. God knows how many innocent lives will be lost.’ Heathcliff folded his hands

together and began reciting a prayer for the dead. *De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine; Domine, exaudi vocem meam.* Tears tumbled down the tutor's face as he reached the last line. *Et ipse redimet Israël ex omnibus iniquitatibus ejus.*

‘Perhaps it’s the end of the world?’ asked Albert, whose mind was illuminated by the spark of insight.

‘Alternatively, its transformation into something else.’ Heathcliff walked to a shelf on which were books on political theory; seizing a hefty volume, he flicked through its pages and then read,

For centuries, the lower classes have been under the yoke of an economic system predicated on maximising profits for the capitalist elite, even if it means grossly underpaying the workers and polluting the environment to achieve it. Inequitable laws that enable the capitalist elite to evade tax at the expense of the workers, who are forced to pay more tax than the capitalist elite, reinforce this economic system, further exacerbating the plight of the lower classes. In short, if governments do not address this

inequality, the lower classes may violently overthrow capitalistic societies.

‘In the past, I never gave this passage much credence.’ Heathcliff closed the book. ‘Now I do.’ Gunfire rang out, causing the volume to slip from his hand as he dashed back to Albert. ‘It’s too late to stop the revolution.’

In the distance, voices reverberated like claps of thunder between the warring sides. Time stretched like a rubber band, then snapped back into place when a General demanded, ‘Release the hostages, or we’ll fire.’

‘Fuck off, army swine,’ said the radicals with a jeering snicker. When the Calvary officers fanned out, allowing the carriage gun to be manoeuvred into position, the rebels stood defiant, conquering the natural proclivity to run away; instead, they goaded the army. ‘Kill us if you will. We’ve nothing left to lose.’

Bullets peppered the air, and the loud boom of the gun carriage discharging its shell followed, fracturing the university’s sandstone wall like a walnut. From the perceived safety of the bookstore, Albert and Heathcliff

were (like the books that lined the shelves) rattled by the sound. Every time the gun carriage discharged its deadly load, its shock wave showered Albert and Heathcliff with dust; however, this was inconsequential compared to the carnage inflicted on the rebels whose blood stained the Grim Reaper's scythe.

For over an hour, the battle ensued until the sound of bullets and exploding shells grew fainter. Sensing that it was safe to emerge from behind the bookcase, Heathcliff edged closer to the window, where a rivulet of blood gushed past, pooling in front of the bookstore's gutter. The dull thud of corpses being hauled into wagons broke the silence. Their twisted, blackened mouths were frozen in a scream of horror. As the wagons drifted down the street towards them, the pig-like stench of death permeated the shop. Albert and Heathcliff, trying not to dry retch, covered their noses. When the caravan of carnage had filed past, Albert rose from his haunches and lumbered towards the window where Heathcliff, whose feet were rooted to the spot, stood in shock.

The tutor walked to the door. ‘We’d better leave now.’

‘Wait,’ said Albert, who rummaged the shelves searching for books on ancient Greek philosophy.

Heathcliff knitted his brow. ‘To hell with the books.’

‘They’re the reason for my journey.’ He hesitated. ‘A friend of mine needs them.’

‘Not your Shylockian¹¹ roommate, Reuven?’ Albert nodded. ‘Don’t bother yourself with that sort.’

His eyes scorched the tutor, who lowered his gaze. ‘What do you mean, Heathcliff?’

‘Well, er.... Your reputation is at stake, Albert.... Particularly after what the yid¹² had said about you and him.’

‘What did Reuven say?’

‘At first, I didn’t believe him.’ Heathcliff hesitated and then looked at Albert before returning his gaze to the

¹¹ Refers to a relentless and vindictive moneylender as portrayed in the Shakespearean play, *The Merchant of Venice*, by the character Shylock, who demands a pound of flesh as collateral from his Christian rival, Antonio.

¹² A disparaging and offensive term used to refer to a Jew.

ground. ‘Especially when Reuven was drunk at the time, but now your actions reveal the truth of what the yid had told me.’

‘Actions?’

‘Your feverish search of books to fulfil a friend’s needs.’ He looked at Albert, who was as white as chalk. ‘It indicates—’

‘What?’

‘You and Reuven are nancy boys involved in an amourette. I wish to God it wasn’t true, but have no fear, I shan’t publicise it to anyone.’ His hand toyed with the brass doorknob. ‘However, stories abound in the scandal sheets about high society men being blackmailed by unscrupulous servants. Be careful and try not to draw attention to yourself.’ The tutor gestured. ‘We’d better leave now.’ The young man did not respond to Heathcliff’s appeal, for his attention was again focused on scanning the gold-embossed titles. ‘What a dullard you are, Albert Sinclair,’ said the tutor with soaring sarcasm. His hand hovered above the doorknob before twisting it, and exiting

the building, he delivered his final rebuke. ‘Well, that is to be expected from an aristocrat, none of whom have common sense.’

Like a peas’ pod, the door burst open as Heathcliff departed, leaving Albert to contemplate the consequences of indulging in hedonism and the dreaded execration from the public. Yet the lower classes had more significant worries (toppling the autocratic government and setting up an alternative system) than caring about Albert’s affair with a Jew. Regardless, he continued to rummage through the gold-embossed titles, stacking those pertinent to ancient Greek philosophy into a pile before tossing them into a discarded bag. Satisfied, Albert snatched the bag and skulked out of the bookstore. He looked ahead, lingering on the smoke-shrouded road leading to the university. After that, the jangle of horses’ hooves pierced the silence, causing the young man to quicken his stride to evade the sound. However, the clippety-clop increased in volume, prompting him to cower behind a red post box. From the smoky nebulous emerged Calvary officers caked in soot

and blood. Their faces were bereft of emotions, as if the battle, like a vampire, had drained them of their life force. Unaware that Albert observed them, some officers finally surrendered to sadness, shedding tears at the loss of their fellow countrymen.

He waited for the procession to leave before emerging from behind the red post box. Without delay, Albert dashed to the railway station, where he saw a queue of dishevelled students (laden with trunks and suitcases) snaking around the building. Their objective was to flee Cantabrigia for the perceived safety of Londinium, which, unbeknownst to them, was in lockdown.

Meanwhile, in the sage green drawing-room of 152 Cavendish Street, news of the Cantabrigian incident had reached Cecil, who paced back and forth, praying that his

nephew had survived the massacre. Yet, as the sun slid in the west, the older man was more convinced that Albert had been murdered. His heart skipped a beat when the telephone emitted its resonant ring. He dashed down the passage, lifting the telephone receiver from its hook. The voice on the other end caused Cecil to sigh in relief.

‘Thank god you’re alive, Albert.’ His eyes widened with disbelief. ‘The trains are delayed. You won’t be back until the following morning.’ Albert’s voice faded in and out. ‘Alright, I’ll tell Sims to fetch you from *King’s Cross Station*. Stay safe, my boy.’ Cecil placed the receiver back on its hook as footsteps echoed in the background, causing him to turn around, where he saw Edith descending the stairs and lingering at the drawing-room entrance. Her forehead was crisscrossed with furrows, prompting the aged man to say soothingly, ‘That was Albert.’ Cecil noticed her upper lip curving upward on the left side of her mouth as she smiled. ‘He called to inform me that his departure had been delayed.’ He noted his words’ peculiar effects on Edith and how her eyes darted from him to the

floor and back again. ‘Albert won’t return until the following morning.’

‘That’s great to hear,’ said the girl, whose timbre conveyed to Cecil hollowness.

‘What did you do after breakfast, Edith?’

‘I went for a stroll—’

‘That lasted most of the day.’ Discomfort spread across Edith’s face, causing Cecil to say in a chuckle. ‘I swear I saw you leave in a taxi early this morning and then return in a different one an hour ago.’

‘Don’t cross-examine me, Mr Sinclair.’ She stared scornfully at the senior man, who was surprised by the girl’s strength. ‘I’m a guest, not a prisoner, so I may come and go as I please.’

Ruffled by her recalcitrance, the older man, to save face, changed the course of their conversation by asking, ‘Have you confirmed a wedding date?’

‘Well, er... not yet.’

‘You owe it to Albert to set a date... Especially when my nephew could have been killed today.’

‘Killed?’

‘Didn’t you know of the massacre at Occidental University?’ She shook her head. ‘My nephew put himself in danger to fulfil your request to fetch books for what’s his name... Ah, yes, I remember now, Reuven.’ The girl looked away, for she could not stomach his brazen boldness a moment longer. ‘Would Reuven risk his life as Albert has done today?’

‘Don’t denigrate him,’ said Edith, clenching her fist into a ball as she continued vehemently, ‘When he’s done you no harm, sir.’

‘Why should it matter to you what I say about the Jew?’ As he vented his anti-Semitic vitriol, Edith stayed silent, further infuriating him. ‘Don’t take me for a fool, Edith. I suspect you and Reuven have been intriguing. Albert even suspects it.’

‘How deluded you are, old man,’ said the girl, walking to the staircase. ‘There’s nothing between Reuven and me.’ His gaze followed her up the stairs, after which

her condescending voice trailed off. 'Believe what you will, I don't care.'

In that silence, Cecil regathered his thoughts, focusing them like a beam of light on how best to control Edith, whom he feared was undermining his authority. Yet, as he re-entered the drawing-room (slumping like a sack of coal onto the divan), it never occurred to him that his attitudes about women were an artefact of archaic society that would be forever transformed through the titanic turmoil that was underway. Regardless, Cecil was reminded of his pecuniary inadequacies by the shadowy outlines, which increased in number on the wallpapered walls, for what goaded him the most was having to rely on Edith's cornucopia of gold to buy back the forfeited paintings. Emasculated, the senior man sank into the quicksands of envy from which he would never escape. But what he feared most was Edith getting hold of her late mother's unaltered Will, which spelled certain doom to the Sinclair family. For that reason, Cecil touched his pocket (contained within was a small pistol), reminding him it

would be better to blow one's brains out than experience poverty. Without warning, the electric bulb flickered on, revealing to the seated old man the silhouette of Sims, whose hand retreated from the light switch.

Roaring with rage, Cecil snarled, 'What do you want?'

'Don't speak to me in that way, sir.' Cecil clenched his jaw as Sims edged closer, and then the driver dropped onto an adjacent chair and said in a mocking tone, 'You're no better than me. Particularly when you don't have a pot to piss in—'

'How dare you, Sims. Have you forgotten my charitable act of hiring you when your previous employer, Lady Augusta Windermere, warned me not to? The dowager said, "Beware of the viper... he lurks in the background watching everyone, recording everything one says. Then, when you least expect it, he'll strike, injecting his poisonous lies."'

'Well, the old bitch was always melodramatic.' Sims stopped to lick his dry lips. 'I didn't come here to discuss

her character assessment but the money owing to me.’ He raised his clenched fist. ‘When will I get paid, sir?’

‘Good things come to those who wait.’

‘I’m tired of your bullshit.’ The ginger sideburns driver leapt from the chair, grabbing Cecil by the scruff of his collar. ‘Cough up the money.’

‘Hush, Sims.’ Cecil placed his hand on the driver’s mouth. ‘You’ll attract everyone’s attention, especially Edith’s.’

Sims pushed his hand away. ‘You’re afraid I’ll upset your meal ticket, Edith.’ The aged employer raised and drew his eyebrows together, prompting Sims to ask, ‘It’s her money you’re afraid of losing?’ Cecil stayed silent. ‘Don’t look surprised. I know more than you realise. However, the moment you renege on your promise.’ Sims drew a knife from his pocket and gently traced the blade over the old man’s cheek, whose widening eyes were reflected in the weapon’s metallic glint. ‘I’ll cut a pound of flesh from your hide as payment.’

‘Now that you’ve said what you wanted,’ said Cecil, reaching into his pocket, drawing out the pistol, and thrusting it under the driver’s chin. ‘Leave, or I’ll shoot.’ Fearful of death, Sim withdrew the knife and slinked away, but before exiting the room, the old man said, ‘Fetch Albert from the train station tomorrow morning.’ The old man waved the loaded gun at him. ‘That’ll be all for now.’

While driving to *King’s Cross Station*, Sims observed multiple rat-catchers with their black terriers. With their muzzles stained with blood, the terriers dragged their prey from the stormwater drains and ruthlessly battered them against the cobblestone. The morning air was scented with the foul odour of dead rodents as their mutilated bodies were transported to a crematorium on the city’s outskirts. Nonetheless, the driver dismissed any worries generated by this ominous occasion and devoted his attention to

fattening his wallet. Sims would bide his time until dealing his trump card (Mrs Andley's unaltered Will), for he reasoned, *Edith will pay a lot to get hold of it*. His mouth salivated at the thought of swimming in an ocean of gold coins. Also, the driver deduced that giving Edith the document would make her more inclined not to marry Albert, depriving the Sinclair family of financial security.

As the motor stopped outside the train station, Sims smiled at the idea of ruining Cecil. As Albert exited the station, Sims' smile turned into a frown, only to become unfazed when Albert entered the vehicle, as observed from his composed face.

'Let's first go to the Bethlehem hospital,' said the young man, who saw a glimmer of curiosity in the driver's grey eyes. 'Before you say anything, Sims, I'm visiting my university chum to give him books to read.'

Sims remained tight-lipped for a while, yet the closer the motor came to Bethlehem, the more enraged he became for what irked the ginger sideburns driver was Albert's

hypocritical concern when the young passenger's past actions proved otherwise.

‘That’s good of you, sir, to think of the needs of others.’ He took his foot off the accelerator, slowing the vehicle to a crawl. ‘I’d wish you and Mr Sinclair thought of mine as well.’ His sarcasm stung Albert, rendering the younger man mute. A barrage of complaints shot forth from Sims, causing Albert to wince in pain as a headache tightened its hold.

‘For the love of God, stop griping Sims.’ He cradled his head. ‘I’ve had a trying day.’

Satisfied at making his point, the driver pushed on the accelerator, firing the motor like an arrow towards Bethlehem Hospital. As the metallic beast roared down the cobble streets, stopping at police checkpoints, the smell of disinfectant and uneasiness intensified the closer they got to the hospital. Adjoining the road was an imposing serrated barrier; behind stood the huddled masses, whose weak voices beckoned to be released. However, their pleas

were ignored by the police, who struck their outstretched blackened hands with wooden batons. Sims turned the motor around without warning, inviting the passenger's ire.

'Go back at once, Sims,' said Albert, seizing the driver by the scruff of his neck.

'I should've realised sooner.' He slowed the vehicle to avoid an accident. 'Look around you. There's pestilence here.'

'None of the newspapers have reported it.'

'One doesn't need to read to know it's here,' said Sims, brushing aside his hand.

'Go back, Sims.'

'To hell with you.'

'I'll make it worth your while.'

The sands of time reached halfway up the hourglass before the driver asked, 'How much?'

'Will £10 be sufficient?'

'Don't take me for a fool, sir.'

'I'm not Sims. Far from it.'

The ginger sideburns man turned around, sizing up the passenger. ‘Is your friend worth a thousand?’ He nodded, causing Sims to snicker. ‘Your face betrays more than friendship for him—’

Albert paled with worry, hoping no one had overheard Sims’ statement. ‘Please, let’s go now.’

The motor swung around and charged towards Bethlehem Hospital, on a quest like the three wise men to pay homage to a divine saviour. However, rather than shower Reuven with gold, frankincense and myrrh, Albert would shower him with adoration. Moments later, Albert’s hopes were dashed by a checkpoint barring admittance to the hospital’s driveway, causing his heart to become heavy with despair. A tall policeman with ash blonde hair gestured at them. The motor skidded to a halt beside the imposing officer who, with pen and notebook in hand, asked for their names and addresses before jotting them down.

‘Now you’ve got our details, officer. May my driver and I be allowed into Bethlehem Hospital?’

The policeman walked to his commander and then whispered in his ear. The commander (a corpulent man of sixty) whitened, gesturing him back towards the motor.

‘We’ve come a long way.’ He hesitated, fearing what the official would say. Despite that, Albert continued to charm with his genteel manner. ‘May we pass, officer?’

‘Turn around, sir.’ The ashen blonde man tapped his baton on the vehicle’s chassis. ‘Bethlehem is under quarantine. No one may enter.’

Albert leaned forward, his face resembling a swollen tomato in the dash mirror. ‘That’s outrageous. Since when?’

‘Yesterday, sir.’

‘There were no reports in the newspapers,’ said Albert in a contemptuous huff.

Like a jack-in-the-box, Albert sprung at the policeman, who pushed him back with an almighty thump. ‘If you don’t want to spend a night in jail, then calm down, sir. You needn’t be hysterical. The government has

everything under control.’ Albert crossed his arms and then mumbled a few curse words. ‘In a few days, it’ll be resolved.’

As the vehicle slowly swung around, Albert could not help but vent his anger. ‘I hope for all our sakes it is, officer.’

After having delivered his scathing remark, Albert motioned the motor onwards. *Thank God that arrogant toff is gone*, pondered the ash-blond policeman whose eyes followed their rapid departure until they disappeared around a bend in the road.

The afternoon sun shed sinister shadows on the increasingly bare walls of the sage green drawing-room. In the corner, a gramophone emitted a swell of sound and

sombreness, saturating the room with the *Moonlight Sonata*, causing Edith's breath to slow in time with the music. From the padded divan, she saw Albert enter, slumping beside her with an enigmatic expression engraved on his face. A moment later, Cecil joined them, advancing towards the gramophone, where he removed the stylus from the spinning record. Then Albert gathered her hand in his, recounting in a matter-of-fact voice what had happened earlier. When he mentioned Bethlehem Hospital, her heart skipped a beat, causing the girl to fly forward.

‘Bethlehem’s under quarantine.’ She slumped back onto the divan, trying to come to terms with what Albert had said. ‘How’s Reuven?’

Albert shrugged, prompting Uncle Cecil to say with contrived candour, ‘Although my heart goes out to your friend.’ He hesitated, fixing his gaze on Albert before returning to her. ‘For now, redirect your attention to the wedding preparations.’

‘That’s uncalled-for, uncle,’ said Albert with a trill of annoyance.

Overwhelmed, Edith buried her face in her embroidered sleeve, trying to prevent the cup of her emotions from overflowing. Alas, for the unfortunate girl, her sorrow spilt onto the carpet in a succession of sobs.

‘Don’t cry,’ said Albert, enfolding his arms around her.

‘I’m lost if Reuven dies—’

‘I apologise for having hurt you.’ The aged man stopped, trying to summon empathy. ‘Please, believe me, my intentions are honourable. I only consider your happiness, Edith, and my nephew’s.’

‘Shut up, uncle.’

The old man gestured for him to be quiet. ‘Please let me speak, Albert.’ Cecil edged closer. ‘Listen to what I say, Edith. You’ll realise how wise my words are.’ Albert rolled his eyes in disbelief. ‘Instead of dwelling on things which are out of your control, like the fate of Reuven, you could channel them onto what you can control, like the wedding, for they offer a distraction.’ Her Gorgonian gaze halted his advance. Then Cecil chuckled, hoping to tame

her temper. ‘Nothing can be gained from fretting except wrinkles and a few grey hairs.’ Unnerved by her silence, the old man bowed his head in supplication, but before exiting the room, he said, ‘Your quixotic intentions are admirable. Don’t waste them on those undeserving of them, like Reuven.’

The same could be said for you, too, old man, thought Edith, whose mind was a whirling tempest of ire. Regardless, money slipped through her fingers at a rapid rate that Edith (desperate to leave Cavendish Street) was prepared to marry the Apollonian youth to enrich her coffers to get away. Albert, she reasoned, would be malleable to spousal persuasion, kowtowing to her requests. Her dominant demand was for Reuven to be close by, whom she hoped would service her needs like a tomcat. Hence, Edith puckered her lips before planting a Judas kiss on the unsuspecting Albert.

‘Once married, we won’t have to put up with your windbag uncle.’ Albert smirked. ‘We can set up house elsewhere in Britannia, away from the mayhem and death

in Londinium.’ She fluttered her long dark lashes and then asked, ‘You want that as much as I?’ He nodded. ‘God willing, Reuven could stay with us after he’s released from Bethlehem.’

‘You and I are on the same page regarding Reuven.’ His face was a flaming rose. ‘The sooner we’re married, the sooner we can realise this.’ He showered her in kisses while imagining she was Reuven. ‘The three of us will be happy together.’

‘Yes,’ said Edith, who likewise envisioned the Hasidic youth’s smouldering lips on hers.

Much like the son of the Nazarene carpenter, Albert and Edith revered Reuven with God-like awe as he personified purity, a virtue they had forsaken for worldly pleasures. It never crossed their minds that Reuven would be reluctant to join their domestic arrangement, that if he failed to fulfil either of their erotic expectations, they would crucify him to the wooden cross of contempt. Albert and Edith waited expectantly: everything depended on

Reuven outsmarting the Grim Reaper, who stalked the white-washed corridors of Bethlehem.

As the days transitioned into weeks, Albert and Edith still had heard nothing about their friend's fate. News of the outbreak (after previous governmental obstruction) circulated in the fashionable drawing-rooms of Cavendish Street. Edith's eyes prickled with tears every time she read the death toll, causing her to withdraw to the bedroom in a mental malaise. Although the disease predominantly affected the poor, a growing number from the higher stratum of society were falling ill and dying. Hence, Albert scheduled the wedding in a small registry office on the city's outskirts the following Friday. Once married, the couple would flee to the countryside, an oasis in a wasteland of death.

Before this happened, Albert took his uncle aside, hauling him into the drawing-room, closing the door behind them with a gentle thump. He took a deep breath, fearful that his plans for tomorrow would invite the old man's ire. After hearing all the details, Cecil's eyes bulged from their sockets because Albert had the temerity not to consider Cecil's welfare now that the city had descended into chaos.

‘For all that I’ve done for you.’ He raised his hand, preparing to strike the young man. ‘This is how you repay me, Albert.’ Overwhelmed with self-pity, Cecil lowered his hand. ‘Tossing me onto the rubbish heap to die.’ Silence pervaded the room before the old man roared into life again, haranguing his nephew with contemptuous words, causing Albert to look away. ‘Am I not worthy of your protection? Not worthy of financial security?’ Albert returned his gaze. ‘Take me with you, or I’ll dash your chances with Edith. I’ll confess everything to her.’

‘You wouldn’t!’

‘Yes.’ He dug his finger into Albert’s chest. ‘Say goodbye to Edith’s money. Together, we’ll die either of hunger or pestilence.’

Without warning, the telephone ring travelled like a sonorous wave down the passage. ‘Uncle, we’ll talk about this later,’ said Albert, dashing towards the door, yanking it open, and then sprinting down the corridor in a blur of motion. He prized the telephone receiver from its hook. Albert recognised the grating voice on the other end as Dr Drysdale.

‘Come to Bethlehem without delay.’

Albert’s throat formed a knot, causing him to unbutton his collar and gasp out the words in long, drawn-out breaths.

‘Is... he ... dead, doctor?’

‘Fear not, Mr Sinclair. The plague hasn’t reached this ward yet.’ Albert emitted a sigh. ‘Please come and take Reuven away before it does.’

‘Yes, doctor,’ said Albert, returning the telephone receiver to its hook. His hand stretched to the overhead

electric bell, pressing it. He awaited Sims' arrival from the bowels of the townhouse.

Moments later, the driver trudged up the stairwell and saw Albert approaching, whose timorous finger pointed at the hallway clock.

'Time is at a premium.' The ginger sideburns man gave off a grunt. 'Get the motor ready, Sims.'

The driver bared his teeth for a fleeting moment, then lumbered towards the entrance and forcefully opened the door, slamming it shut as he exited. Aroused by curiosity, Cecil emerged from the drawing-room. He fired a salvo of questions at Albert, who was reluctant to answer and eager to leave.

'Whom did you speak to on the telephone?' The young man pressed his lips together. 'Answer me, Albert!'

'Dr Drysdale—'

An epiphany struck him like a bolt of lightning. 'Is it about your classmate, Reuven?' Again, he pressed his lips together, inviting his uncle's bile. 'Don't bring that yid here, Albert.' Cecil stamped his foot to reinforce his

displeasure. 'I won't stand for it now that he's likely infected.'

'Reuven will be if I don't rescue him now.'

'No Albert, I forbid it.'

'You're in no position to lecture me, old man.'

Unaware that Edith listened from the stairhead, they continued to hurl insults at each other until Cecil, knowing that his words had fallen on deaf ears, stormed off in a huff.

'Take me as well,' said the girl, whose dress rustled as she dashed down the stairs. He took her hand with no objection, leading her towards the entrance.

Sims stood by the vehicle, leering at them as they approached. The ginger sideburns man would have opened the door in the past, but he jumped into the driver's seat this time. He waited for the couple to be seated before shoving his foot on the accelerator, causing the motor to rocket down the road. Usually, during the late afternoon, the streets were congested with carriages, omnibuses, and carts. However, now it was empty except for a few passing paddy wagons full of emaciated people whose sunken eyes

stared blankly from the grilled mesh at the fast-moving motor.

Street after street surged past in bands of white and grey, resulting in their journey to Bethlehem, which would have taken an hour, being completed in half the time. Where there had once been a police checkpoint (barring admittance to the hospital's driveway) was littered with the remains of burnt barriers. Death now pervaded the air, its shit-like stench sinking its odorous claws into everything.

The motor stopped at the mouth of the gravel driveway, prompting Sims to look back at the couple, whose noses were concealed by their lavender-scented handkerchiefs.

'I ain't going further.' The stink slapped Sims, causing him to cover his nose with his jacket's sleeve. 'Nor should you, sir. That place is a harbinger of death.'

'You'll wait here, Sims, while I'll retrieve Reuven.'

Edith seized Albert's arm, preventing him from alighting from the vehicle. 'Sims is right. You shouldn't go. It's dangerous.'

However, he brushed her hand aside, opened the motor's door, and jumped on the ground.

‘I shan’t be too long, Edith.’

Their eyes followed his retreating figure until it disappeared behind the privet hedge. Without warning, a pine-infused gust swept the fetid aroma away, allowing the motor's occupants to uncover their noses.

‘I know for sure you hate me.’ Startled by his bluntness, she was about to utter an untruth when the driver continued, ‘Hush, don’t flatter me by saying otherwise. I’m not upset.’ From the dash mirror, he watched her withdraw to the other side of the backseat. ‘If you don’t mind me saying, your derision should be directed at the elder, Mr Sinclair.’

‘Pray, what do you mean?’

‘Your marriage to Albert is a business transaction.’ The driver’s insightful comment caused her complexion to colour a whitish green. ‘I know you don’t love him, nor Albert with you.’

‘You’re mistaken, Sims.’

‘Am I, young lady?’ The fat man chuckled. ‘You’re not fooling anyone.’ He turned around, exposing his yellowish teeth as he smiled. ‘I’ve got a business proposal that’ll benefit you substantially.’

‘I doubt it,’ said Edith, crossing her arms while staring into the distance.

‘I possess the key to your freedom, young lady.’

Curious, she met his gaze in the rearview mirror. ‘Why should I trust you?’

‘I’m far more honest than Mr Sinclair.’ He glanced out the window, fearful of being overheard. ‘Young lady, you haven’t heard the half of it,’ said Sims in a muffled voice, encouraging Edith to lean forward to catch his every word. ‘He’ll stop at nothing to marry his nephew to a wealthy orphan.’ The girl covered her mouth, petrified by what he would say next. ‘Cecil’s subverted the law, bending it to suit him. If given the chance, he’ll resort to murder. Give me your word that if I help you.’ As Albert and Reuven approached from afar, he paused. Their footsteps echoed in a rhythmic crunch, urging Sims to keep

going. ‘You’ll help me in return.’ She nodded. ‘I’ll come to your room around midnight.’

As Reuven entered the motor, Edith’s eyes welled up with tears, seeing him as a faded flower with a shaved head and a scrawny frame covered in a thick layer of grime. Despite everything, Edith’s emotions towards him had shifted, becoming more maternal; just like Ruth in the Bible, she vowed to not abandon the invalid and would go wherever he went. Her devotion ignited jealousy in Albert, provoking him (as he climbed into the backseat) to shove himself between her and Reuven, acting as a barrier, further exasperating the situation. Unable to comfort her friend, she looked away as the vehicle sped back to Cavendish Street, allowing Albert to brush his hand against Reuven’s, who swept it aside, fearful of the observant driver, who flashed a scornful gaze.

After successive glimpses in the dash mirror, Sims had cottoned on to the dishevelled passenger’s identity because, even under a layer of dirt, his almond-shaped eyes still shone like brown agate, reminding Sims of the youth

who had spurned his advances. In the dash mirror, he silently mouthed, 'My gold sovereign isn't good enough for you, rent boy?' Then the odious man chuckled, triggering Reuven to cower like a beaten dog.

'Shut up, Sims. You're upsetting my friend,' Albert scorned.

He never realised that Sims and Reuven had already crossed paths, on a ferry deck of all places. As parts of Reuven's past were a jigsaw puzzle, Albert (ever curious) would piece them together by asking questions later that night. Albert would have to coax the answers from the quivering fellow.

Unlike the broken Humpty Dumpty, my love shall restore Reuven, making him whole once more, thought Albert, as the motor moved like a gust of wind into Cavendish Street. Once the metallic beast slowed, he shot up from the backseat, opened the door and guided Reuven towards the townhouse, leaving Edith and Sims to watch their retreat with a focused gaze.

Violet-scented steam engulfed the bathroom, causing the basin mirror to fog up. With a swift move of the hand, Albert wiped it to see his companion's bare body. As Reuven relaxed in the bath, cleansing himself with a sponge, Albert listened nonchalantly to his friend, rattling off the reasons for returning to *Terra Australis*.

'Must you go?' asked Albert, whose voice was pregnant with poignancy.

'There's nothing for me here.' He rose like Aphrodite from the soapy sea, then lifted one leg at a time over the bath's rim before towel-drying his wet body.

'Not even for me.' Reuven was silent. 'Stay until after the wedding.' He shook his head. 'Besides, we shan't be separated, as Edith agreed you can live with us.'

'The sooner I leave, the better it will be,' said the young antipodean with cutting cynicism.

'Coward.'

‘Me? A coward?’

‘That’s exactly what you are.’

‘If you’re courageous, you’d come with me and not trick Edith into marriage.’

‘Why are you defending her?’ Reuven looked away. ‘Is it me or her that you love?’

‘Please let us not quarrel any more,’ said Reuven, who tossed the towel to the floor, revealing his slender physique, to Albert’s delight. He snatched a pair of trousers that lay over a chair and threaded a leg at a time, pausing to grab a long-sleeved shirt that hung on a clothes hook before buttoning it up. ‘Let us part on good terms, Albert.’ He hesitated. ‘Because the time we spent together, no matter how short, will last a lifetime.’

‘Please stay.’

‘I can’t, Albert. Please understand *Terra Australis* is my home. I belong there, not here.’

‘Shh,’ said Albert, whose ears detected the sonorous sound of the hallway gong, alerting them of the imminent dinner. ‘Come, my uncle doesn’t like to be kept waiting.’

After leaving the bathroom, they lingered at the stairhead, watching the maids, carrying platters of food, rush into the dining room. The young men dreaded facing Cecil and Edith at the dining table. With a deep gulp of air, they descended the stairs and staggered down the vista of enfiladed rooms, stopping at the oriental-inspired dining room. Before entering, Albert squeezed his companion's hand to reassure him.

‘At last, we meet Reuven,’ said Sinclair senior, concealing his contempt with artificial affability to impress Edith, who was taken in by his deception. ‘You’re lucky to have Edith and Albert as friends.’

‘Indeed, I am,’ said Reuven with a tremor of nervousness.

‘Edith won’t mind me telling you, uncle.’ His gaze drifted from her to Reuven before returning to the old man. ‘We’re blessed to have Reuven’s friendship.’

‘Come sit beside me,’ said Edith, gesturing at the Hasidic youth who was halfway from the dining table.

He slumped next to Edith, who comforted him by clutching his hand. However, her gesture was in vain as Cecil's eyes conveyed the same intensity as those who perpetrated pogroms, as they lacked empathy, making Reuven recoil.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Albert and Edith in unison, who feared their friend would descend into madness again.

Reuven remained tight-lipped.

‘Perhaps he’s hungry,’ said Cecil, signalling to the maids in the room’s corner, silent observers of the unfolding drama. ‘Bring my guest some food.’

When a stout maid returned and put the food-filled plate in front of the Hasidic youth, his complexion turned a pale green. Reuven pushed the pork chop to the other side of the plate with his fork, daring not to offend Cecil, whose eyes sparkled with sadistic satisfaction. As the dinner progressed, Albert and Edith (unaware of the culinary *faux pas*) cheerfully chomped on the pork; however, each time they tried to engage Reuven in conversation, he remained unwontedly quiet.

‘Is something the matter?’ asked Edith with a frown.

Reuven’s head shake did little to convince the girl, who kept her gaze focused on him.

A moment later, Cecil asked, ‘Isn’t the meal to your liking?’ He signalled to the stout maid, who brought another dish. ‘Perhaps this will suffice?’ The mature man cradled a wineglass in his hand, watching with devilish delight as the Hasidic youth took several mouthfuls. ‘Ah, I knew you’d like the rabbit pie. It always does the trick.’ Reuven spat it out, provoking a light chuckle from Cecil.

In a fit of rage, Albert knocked the glass from the old man’s wrinkled hand. ‘You shan’t upset my friend any longer, uncle.’

‘Come back, Reuven,’ said Edith with a timbre of concern.

‘I meant no harm, Albert.’ His bones creaked as he bent down to pick up the shattered glass. ‘What a waste, my best claret.’ Their stares scorched him. ‘How was I supposed to know what Reuven could or could not eat?’

‘Your words are as hollow as your actions,’ said Albert with a flash of insight. ‘Since Reuven’s arrival, you’ve made him feel unwelcomed.’ He waved a finger at Cecil, who crossed his arms in defiance. ‘This dinner was your way of showing it.’

‘That’s a lie, Albert.’ The young man retreated to the entrance, causing Cecil to slam his fist on the table. ‘At any rate, the yid should be grateful when those less fortunate than him are starving.’ While the men bickered, Edith’s elbow bumped into her plate, causing her fork to fall to the floor. Cecil stretched out and seized her hand before she could retrieve the utensil. ‘Leave it, Edith. The maids will see to it.’ He pulled her towards him. ‘Dearest child, don’t believe what my nephew says.’ The young man was about to speak when his uncle added, ‘Like an actor, Albert’s always been melodramatic.’ She broke free of Cecil’s hold, causing him to smirk. ‘Fortunately, Albert’s an unconvincing thespian, for one doesn’t believe the credibility of his performance.’ He hesitated. ‘You, Edith, are more believable. Despite that, I wager you’re plotting

something. I see it flash like a lighthouse every so often, blinding one in its intensity.'

'You are mistaken, sir,' said Edith, springing from the chair and advancing towards Albert, who hovered by the entrance.

'Take note, Albert, she's up to mischief.'

With that said, they searched for Reuven, who was curled up on the divan in the dimly lit drawing-room, crying, unaware of their presence. With a downward flick of the light switch, the room was bathed in a golden glow, triggering the semi-recumbent man to sit bolt upright. Relieved that it was Albert and Edith, he slumped back like a limp puppet. They shut the door behind them as they came in.

'Take no notice of my bastard uncle.'

'As a Jew, I'm forever dealing with his sort,' said Reuven, making room for Edith on the large divan.

‘Albert, be a dear... bring a plate of steamed vegetables and chicken... Is that suitable, Reuven?’ Reuven nodded. ‘While you’re gone, Reuven and I will chat.’

‘Of course,’ said Albert in a voice inflamed with jealousy, Edith grimaced when he vacated the room.

‘Like an exotic flower, we’ll never take root in Britannian soil. We’ll always be considered an introduced species unworthy of love and respect.’ She gathered Reuven in her arms. ‘To hell with Mr Sinclair and his ilk! That’s why we must escape.’

‘And Albert, too?’

‘Well, er... Albert living with us isn’t set in stone.’ She kissed him repeatedly. ‘Providence, like a lightning bolt, may strike, liberating us from previous obligations.’

‘How can you say that, Edith?’ He broke free from her impassioned kiss. ‘Your impending marriage signifies an obligation to Albert.’ Reuven recoiled in disgust as she tried to stroke his leg. ‘Enough, Edith.’ He leapt from the divan and walked to the window, where he saw an

embankment of clouds illuminated by the streetlights' white glow. 'What you're hinting at is tawdry. I shan't condescend to that, Edith.' He turned to face her, touching his heart. 'It runs counter to my Jewish faith.'

Yet, who was Reuven kidding, for the lust and love he felt for Albert would bar him admittance to every synagogue the instant everyone discovered his secret. Hence, he took a deep breath, pushing his forbidden desires down inside himself, daring not to betray them as Albert entered with a plateful of food. Edith's cheeks flushed a deep cerise, and she abandoned the room without acknowledging Albert, who watched her retreat with contracting eyes.

'What's wrong, Edith?' asked Albert, whose question trailed behind her as she advanced towards the door.

'Nothing's wrong.' Her hand hovered on the handle, trembling as she twisted it open. 'I wish to go to bed as I'm exhausted.' Avoiding his gaze, she left, leaving the wooden barrier ajar.

‘Here,’ said Albert, thrusting the plate at his companion, who took it from him with unbridled eagerness.

Reuven resumed his seat on the divan, tearing into the chicken drumstick like a famish-stricken animal. With each successive mouthful, his hunger lessened, yet no amount of food could replace his hunger for Albert, whose critical gaze caused the Hasidic youth to put the stripped drumstick down. Mindful that a sudden outburst would cause the plate on his lap to tumble to the ground, Reuven asked judiciously, ‘What’s wrong?’ He noticed a flicker of irritation in his friend’s features. ‘What’ve I done, Albert?’

‘While I was away, what did you talk about?’

‘Nothing, really.’

‘Don’t take me for a fool, Reuven.’ Albert pushed his fingernails into his palms. ‘I saw tears well up in her eyes.’ He unclenched his hands and said in a muffled voice, ‘I’d pity her if I didn’t hate her so much.’ Without warning, he clasped his stomach as suspicion had spun it into a knot. ‘Was it a lover’s tiff?’

‘What?’ The plate slid from his lap, jettisoning its contents onto the Persian carpet. ‘Oh shit, see what you made me do. How can you think so little of me?’ He bent down and picked up the gravy-covered vegetables. ‘There’s nothing between Edith and me.’

‘She’s been a thorn in my side since our train journey to Cantabrigia.’ Overwhelmed by irrational passions, Albert covered his face with his hands, transforming into a crazed creature who perceived potential rivals for Reuven’s ardour. ‘I wish to God I didn’t need her money. Damn her.’ He dropped to his knees. ‘I damn myself for inviting her into our lives,’ said Albert in a cry of anguish, as though he was caught in the serrated snare of obsession. ‘I’ve been competing with her over you, Reuven. Can’t you see what she’s doing?’ The young antipodean looked away. ‘She’s driving a wedge between us.’

‘Music may mollify your worries,’ said Reuven, disturbed by his friend’s histrionics. ‘Do you have a gramophone?’ Albert pointed a trembling finger at the room’s corner. ‘Come sit,’ said Reuven, patting the

upholstered seat, as he walked to the mechanical music maker. ‘I’ll put a record on.’

I’d rather you were dead than be with her, thought Albert, hauling himself onto the divan.

Sentimentality washed over them, as they heard Pauline Viardot’s mezzo-soprano voice singing *Mon coeur s’ouvre à ta voix*¹³. Overwhelmed by the melismatic music, Albert clasped the approaching Hasidic youth by the hand, hoping (against the odds) that this evening would never end. Distraught, he held Reuven, showering him with wet, warm kisses, hoping his amorous demonstration, like that of Dalila’s impassioned song to Samson, could charm Reuven.

‘Stop, Albert, before someone catches us,’ said Reuven, pushing his amourette away.

‘I cannot resist you—’

‘Come to *Terra Australis*.’ He stroked his companion’s cheek. ‘Then we’ll be together.’

¹³ My heart opens up to your voice.

‘I wish to God I could.’ Albert kissed his hand as if it were a holy relic. ‘But you know I need her money. Without it, I’ll be ruined, so to my uncle.’

‘I thought you didn’t care a straw about him?’ asked Reuven with climbing cynicism.

‘Well, er...I owe it to Uncle Cecil.’

‘That’s noble to think of others.’

‘Do I detect sarcasm?’ The Hasidic youth was silent.

‘Besides, we could carry on as before without her ever knowing.’

‘Enough,’ said Reuven, withdrawing his hand from Albert’s fervent lips. ‘I’ve heard all this before.’

‘Shh,’ said Albert, raising a finger to his mouth. Frozen in place, the pair sensed a sinister presence lurking at the shadowy entrance of the drawing-room, vanishing as quickly as it materialised. Albert leapt off the divan, rushed towards the door, and forcefully opened it, only to be met with a corridor cloaked in light and shade, without a single soul in sight.

‘Was anyone there, Albert?’ He shook his head. ‘As it’s late, we better go to bed,’ said the advancing Reuven with a coquettish chuckle. ‘Because tomorrow I’ll be busy booking my passage back home.’ From nowhere, he knitted his brows, then he said in a flurry of words, ‘Oh damn, I must get my passport from the dorm room.’ He hesitated. ‘Would you come to Cantabrigia with me?’

Before Albert could reply, the gramophone ground to a halt, and the drawing-room was once more silent; however, his answer came as a protracted kiss.

‘Thank you,’ said Reuven in a gasp of ecstasy.

The Hasidic youth threaded his arm through Albert’s, and they climbed the stairs, slinking towards Albert’s bedroom where they would engage in the pleasurable act of congress.

At midnight, there was a soft tap on Edith’s bedroom door, prompting her to approach and open it carefully. In

the corridor's gloom, she made out the bulky profile of Sims, who entered the room without waiting to be asked inside.

‘Will you keep your word even if it comes at a hefty price?’ She nodded. ‘Take it, Edith,’ said Sims, handing a thick envelope to the girl, whose eyes widened upon reading its title. ‘I’m clever enough to realise its significance.’ A smile spread across her face as she flipped through its pages. ‘This one is genuine, Edith.’ Her eyes sparkled, for there was no clause pressuring her into marriage. ‘Did you notice any time discrepancies of when it was signed?’

‘Yes, this was signed a year ago, whereas the one with that horrid clause was dated a week after Mama died.’ She grasped her nightgown’s lace collar. ‘What a fool I am for not noticing it before.’ She leant forward and kissed his corpulent cheek. ‘Thank you, Sims. First things first, I’ll confront Mr Templeton.’

‘At dawn, I could drive you there, Edith?’ She nodded. ‘May I offer you wise advice?’

‘Of course.’

‘Mr Sinclair is a snake.’ Her eyes widened. ‘Ah, you agree with me. Excuse my language. The old man hasn’t got a pot to piss in. That’s why he altered the Will.’ He hesitated. ‘However, that’s not the worst of it, Edith. Don’t trust Albert and Reuven. I suspected them; however, my suspicions were confirmed two hours ago.’ His words pierced her heart. ‘They’ve been clever about it, deceiving you and Mr Sinclair.’ Her eyes were a spring of sorrow. ‘I saw Albert and Reuven kissing in the drawing-room.’ Her legs buckled. ‘Don’t waste your tears. They’re not worth it.’ He half-smiled, then opened the door. ‘In time, you’ll thank me,’ said Sims, closing the wooden barrier behind him as he departed into the darkened passageway.

Shocked, Edith slumped beside the entrance, trembling with anger and anguish for having been taken for a fool. She would play the role of Zara from Congreve’s

tragedy¹⁴, even repeating the character's lines to herself with unbridled rage:

‘Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman scorned.’

Yet there was the danger that Edith, like Congreve's character, would die from having drunk from a poisoned chalice. Regardless, she was resolute in exacting revenge that even the winged goddess Nemesis would have handed her a whip to thrash Cecil and Albert. However, her revenge excluded Reuven, whom Edith viewed as much of a victim of the Sinclair family as herself. Forewarned and forearmed, Edith rose from her haunches and walked to the bed, dropping like a stone onto its cushioned mattress, confident she would, at the break of dawn, punish the men who had wronged her.

¹⁴ This refers to William Congreve's tragedy, *The Mourning Bride*, a play that centres on Queen Zara, who is held captive by the King of Granada, leading to a web of love and deception.

Edith and Sims departed for *Templeton & Associates* before anyone else in the townhouse could rub the sleep from their eyes. No one realised they were gone until the girl missed breakfast, whereupon the Sinclairs noticed the motor and fat driver had vanished. With a sense of foreboding, Albert approached her bedroom door and received no answer. Upon entering, he was surprised to see an empty room devoid of her presence and portmanteau. Then Cecil's commanding voice bellowed, summoning him to come downstairs. As Albert entered the drawing-room, lacking his usual radiant hue, the mature man, filled with apprehension, asked him straightaway, 'Has Edith run off?' The young man averted his gaze, prompting Cecil to grab him by the scruff of the neck. 'You numbskull, you've bungled it.' He slapped his nephew and then pushed him away. 'Before it's too late, hunt her down and convince her to return.'

‘Yes, uncle,’ said Albert, touching his swollen cheek.

Before leaving the townhouse, Reuven pulled him aside, eager to discover what had happened.

‘What’s wrong, Albert?’

‘I...I never believed this would happen...Edith’s disappeared.’

‘Oh, my word.’

‘You’ll understand why I can’t accompany you to Cantabrigia,’ said Albert, dashing to the entrance, after which he pushed it open and fled into the street, illuminated by the mellow white of the morning sun.

As Reuven returned to his bedroom, he heard the telephone’s sonorous sound, followed by Cecil’s voice saying, ‘Slow down, Templeton. You’re speaking too quickly.’

Inquisitive, the young antipodean crept down the passage, hiding behind the gold-embossed books of the library, listening expectantly to Cecil’s conversation.

‘My God, she knows,’ said the old man in despair. ‘I’m done for...and so are you, Templeton... tell me where

she is....' The lawyer's voice petered out. 'Speak up, Templeton.' The mature man rolled his eyes. 'Why can't you tell me?' There was silence, followed by sobs. 'Stop your blubbing, Templeton.' The colour drained from Cecil's countenance. 'She's threatened legal action.' In a rage, the old man slammed the telephone receiver back on its hook and stormed down the passage, mumbling a torrent of curse words, 'Damn that bloody bitch, Edith.'

Relieved, Reuven emerged from the library and went upstairs to his bedroom, retrieving silver coins from his purse to pay for the train journey to Cantabrigia. Then, he snuck down the stairs towards the entrance, where he heard a series of thunderous knocks. The young man dashed into the drawing-room, cowering like a child afraid of the Bogeyman behind the divan. A moment later, the stout maid scurried toward the door, and when she opened it, men burst inside demanding to see Mr Sinclair, whom they were told was away by the terrified maid: a blatant lie.

‘As a representative of Mr Sinclair’s creditors, I’ve got the authority to seize the contents of this townhouse,’ said an auburn man, handing the trembling servant a lengthy document.

From out of nowhere, Cecil snatched it from her. ‘Leave us, Adelia!’

The woman scampered like a crab back to the kitchen, listening intently to what was being said.

‘Cough up the money, Mr Sinclair.’

‘What you ask is like getting blood out of a stone.’ Tears slid down his colourless cheeks. ‘I need more time.’

‘You’ve had long enough,’ said the red-haired man, gesturing at his underlings to remove items from the townhouse.

‘Please give me one more month, and I’ll compensate my creditors twofold,’ said Cecil with increasing imploration.

For a moment, the auburn man scratched his chin, calculating the impact of showing generosity before gesturing to his men to stop and leave the townhouse.

‘Alright, I’ll give you a fortnight.’

While the other men trailed outside, Cecil shook his hand and said in relief, ‘You won’t regret it.’

‘Don’t let me down. Otherwise, I’ll have the pleasure of throwing you into debtors’ prison,’ said the red-haired man with a glint of malevolence and then he streamed out of the entrance.

Cecil closed the door and lumbered towards the stairs, lingering at the base balustrade before gripping it as he hauled himself up the stairs.

Meanwhile, Reuven, feeling assured that the threat had subsided, emerged from behind the divan, stealthily left the drawing-room, and dashed towards the entrance. His gaze swept back and forth before opening the door and entering the bustling street, where he hailed a passing taxi.

‘Please take me to *King’s Cross Station*,’ said Reuven, jumping into the backseat. As the vehicle stopped and started, his mind whirled with worry, generating an impatient grunt from the passenger. Half an hour passed before Reuven could make out the train station’s gold

letters above an ocean of carriages and omnibuses in the distance.

Without delay, he tapped the driver's shoulder. 'Stop here.' He paid the taxi fare. 'I'll walk the rest of the way.' Reuven felt the iron weight pressing down, for the world's worries, not to mention his desires for Albert, were all-consuming that they would never leave him even if he wanted them to. As he weaved his way through the throng of people, all he could think about was Albert's fair features and how they contrasted with his own. Regardless of their differences, Reuven loved Albert even at times of mental anguish. All that mattered was holding the beloved in his arms, hoping they would be together again. Yet he knew this would never eventuate, knowing this was the nail in the coffin of the past.

From this day, Reuven's life and that of the world were about to be transformed into something profoundly beautiful, yet he feared the consequences (namely the end of the Earth and that of the universe). With a lungful of air, he hurried to the train station, where he saw Edith (with a

suitcase in hand) waiting for the train to *Clausentum*. He drew her aside, asking in a voice of fearful curiosity, 'Where are you going?'

'I'm returning home,' said she in a stern tone, surprising Reuven with its intensity. 'We're no different, you and I.' Tears glistened in Edith's eyes; shielding her face with her hands, she explained, 'We love people we cannot have.' He moved to console her; however, she pushed him away. 'Don't, Reuven.' Her face was like a swollen sun scorching the young man with its yearning. 'Please don't offer me your hollow words. I know you care for Albert. God knows why. He's an arrogant dilettante who only loves himself.' Mortified, Reuven lowered his head; however, she gently lifted it. 'Sims told me everything.... He saw you and Albert kissing in the drawing-room last night.'

He dreaded deceiving Edith, yet Reuven would not have to resort to such machinations in an ideal world where the love between men was sanctioned.

'Sims utters calumnies against me....'

‘Why would he?’ asked Edith with a raised sceptical brow.

‘To extract money.’

He reached to touch her, but she spurned him by pushing away the offending limb. ‘Don’t poison our friendship with more deceit.’

‘I apologise for having tainted it.’

‘You must think me a fool.’

‘No, Edith, far from it. Besides, a lesser man, which I’m not, would have deflowered you without giving it a second thought.’

‘I must go,’ said the girl, whose voice had become cold and lifeless.

‘May I accompany you?’

‘No.’ Strangeness slid down her face. ‘However, in time, you shall Reuven.’ That said, she walked to the platform as the train to *Clausentum* arrived with imperial majesty. His eyes followed her as she boarded the train.

‘Prove your love,’ said Albert, pulling Reuven close to kiss him. ‘Persuade Edith to return to Cavendish Street.’

‘I cannot. Edith’s already left for Ameryka.’

‘Was it because you fancy her?’

‘Not in how I do for you.’

‘How chivalrous,’ said Albert in a roar of condescension.

‘Chivalry isn’t dead.’ A lump gathered in his throat. ‘Do you remember I once asked about divine and common love?’

‘Please Reuven... without money, I’ll be ruined.’

‘What a bloody fool am I... you want only worldly pleasures, nothing that transcends the physical to become spiritual.’

‘Your philosophical argument makes you as guilty as me.’

‘It pains me to say that you were right. The world is in the flux of momentous change.’

‘Don’t leave me,’ said Albert in an emotional *de Profundis*¹⁵.

¹⁵ Out of the depths (of sorrow, despair, etc.).

As Reuven prepared to fall, he was momentarily mesmerised by the storm that raged over the crumbling ruins of academia, illuminating in bursts of silvery light the events of thirty years ago onto the blank screen of Reuven's recollection. His mind emerged onto an ocean liner's deck infused with the pungent odour of bellowing smoke and brine. From the ship's stern, the coastline of Britannia receded into the distance. Ahead were the distant shores of *Terra Australis*, the home he hoped was untarnished by pestilence and revolution.

As days transitioned into weeks, the liner traversed the turbulent seas, a microcosm of rich and poor, disconnected from the violent reality occurring in the motherland. The only news source was the steady stream of DIT¹⁶ and DAH¹⁷ of Morse code that grew intense with

¹⁶ An echoic word, designating the dot of Morse code.

¹⁷ An echoic word, designating the dash of Morse code.

each passing day. Curious, Reuven hovered outside the wireless room. His heart was in his throat as he overheard the Marconi operators discussing (in vivid detail) the lynching of the Nimrod king of Britannia, whom they said had squealed like a pig as he was strung up from a street lamp. They hinted that the reasons for King Carolus IV's execution were his failure to reduce inequality and contain the plague. Consequently, the Britannian government exercised draconian measures, further intensifying the revolution. Yet these frightful facts did not escape the confines of the wireless room out of fear of inciting violence amongst the passengers who remained blissfully ignorant.

When the ship crossed the equator, Reuven heard how the wealthy had lost their heads beside the blackened shell of the parliament house, a tale that grew more dire the closer the ship came to the golden shores of *Terra Australis*. Thinking Albert had succumbed to the executioner's blade, he stumbled to his cabin and collapsed onto the bunk, muffling his screams with a pillow.

After the ocean liner berthed in Edenglassie, revolution and pestilence swept across Europa, and other parts of the world, where royalty, prime ministers, presidents, and even the Pope in Remus toppled like dominos. The strong military and medical presence, along with the sporadic boom of gunfire, indicated to the disembarking Reuven that not even *Terra Australis* was spared.

In the following months, a blonde-haired Amerykanin¹⁸ leader appeared from out of the chaos whose honeyed words hypnotised his followers, tricking them into waging war. He was a false saviour who wanted to be worshipped as a god, capable of reestablishing the golden calf of capitalism to the world by cleansing it of the revolutionaries.

From nowhere, a flash of silver followed by a loud crack of thunder caused Reuven's mind to return to the present, on the windowsill overlooking the mouldering college destroyed in the *Cleansing Wars*. Without nothing

¹⁸ American.

else to live for, Reuven leaned forward - but was wrenched back inside by an unseen hand.

1912

Massive airships hovered over the landscape, pockmarked with colossal craters. Their high-beam spotlights swept back and forth, searching for the enemy. Entrenched in their underground hideouts, they waited for the aerial white whales to leave before venturing outside. A stricken match illuminated the deadened eyes of Albert, whose beauteous features were marred with battle scars further reinforced by a thesitical temper hellbent on protecting the soldiers under his charge. Yet in the gloom, he pulled from his tattered pocket a faded photo, his eyes stinging with tears for Reuven, whom he feared had been lost to the firestorms of war.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

Overhead, artillery shells exploded, causing his mind to recoil back to the present. Albert stashed the faded photo back in his pocket, grabbed his rifle, and rushed towards the hideout's entrance. His fellow soldiers awaited Albert's orders. Their faces were full of youthful bravado, uncontaminated by years of fighting. As Albert detailed the operation to win back captured territory from the Ruthenian¹⁹ and Seres²⁰ forces, he knew that some of the young men would die in a hail of bullets. Therefore, he took a deep breath, trying not to show a hint of reservation. Without making a sound, they filed out of the hideout, edging their way past no man's land where the foe was encamped behind a mound of earth laced with barbwire. Yellow mist hung in the air. Its burning garlic odour caused the advancing men to don gas masks.

Brrrrrrt! A hidden machine gun roared into life. Some men fell like autumn leaves to the ground, writhing in agony before surrendering to death. Albert ducked behind

¹⁹ Russian

²⁰ Chinese

a stony wall that had once been a farmer's barn. He looked through his scope, aiming at one adversary's head, which bobbed up and down.

Rat-tat-tat! The rifle discharged its deadly load, splitting the man's head asunder. Albert saw one of his men wrestle with the barbwire at the fringe of his vision, unable to break free. It would be minutes before the auburn-haired Ruthenian soldier would aim the machine gun.

Without thinking of the danger, Albert crept towards the ensnared soldier, severing the razor-sharp fencing with a pair of clippers. He signalled for his subordinate to stay and cover him. Albert slithered like a snake around the wire-encircled mound, hoping to take the Ruthenian soldier by surprise. The earth was caked in a thick slime of bloody body parts. Airships approached, flooding the land with its lights. He rose on his haunches, taking aim at the adversary.

Rat-tat-tat! The bullets flew past, missing the auburn-haired soldier who swung the machine gun towards the

oncoming fire. Albert pulled a grenade from his trouser pocket, waiting for the airships to illuminate the mound. As luck would have it, a high-beam spotlight enfolded the Ruthenian soldier, allowing Albert a chance to throw the explosive.

BOOM. A hail of dirt pelted the ground. Confident that the enemy was incapacitated, he rose on his haunches again and warily approached the mound with his finger on the rifle's trigger. Burnt flesh permeated the air, followed by the sight of body parts littering the ground. Albert lowered his rifle, satisfied that there were no survivors. However, a Seres soldier (whom Albert believed was dead) thrust his sword through him, causing Albert to stumble backwards, falling onto the barbwire. The Seres soldier staggered towards the fallen man, readying to finish him off for good. With a downward swing, the sword pierced Albert's heart, staining the faded photo with blood.

Rat-tat-tat! Bullets riddled the enemy.

'Hold on, Captain Sinclair,' said the subordinate, hauling him back to the hideout. 'We're almost there.'

‘I shouldn’t have—’

‘You shouldn’t of what?’

‘My body is as cold as ice. Before I depart this world, Julian, I want you to deliver a message. Will you do that?’ He nodded. ‘Come closer.’ He whispered in Julian’s ear. Then, as quickly as it was communicated, Captain Sinclair died.

1922

Surprise spread across the middle-aged man’s face. He saw in Julian’s eyes a reimagining of all that Albert had lost, and then the storm dissipated, revealing a rainbow of divine light in the distance. At that moment, they embraced, showering the dead world with love, purging it of all its iniquities, revealing an Arcadian world where all that was lost was reborn.

The End